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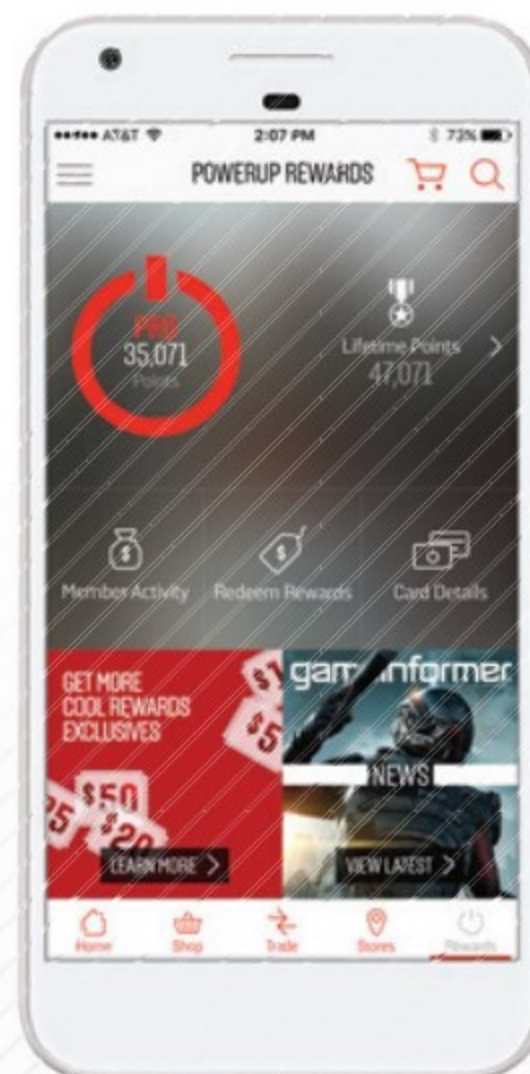
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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Let Your Freak Flag Fly

From time to time I see articles or hear conversations that imply playing video games or wearing fashions that support your love of games (or movies, comics, cosplay, etc.) is something to be ashamed of – that people who advertise their fandom should be looked down upon. That idea makes my blood boil.

First of all: The nerds won. We won a long time ago. “Nerd” is not a derogatory term. I want to look like a nerd. Of course, everything has a time and place; wearing your favorite Pokémon t-shirt to a funeral may not be appropriate, but I’m sure others will appreciate your love of Squirtle in other circumstances. Being or looking like part of “nerd culture” isn’t bad; anyone who says otherwise is encouraging you to hide or deny the things you’re passionate about, and that’s ridiculous.

Entertainment culture has changed so much over the past few decades, and video games have now crossed over into just about every corner of the world. The time to view games (and the people who play them) as anything other than normal just shows how out of touch certain people are when they call us “nerds” like it’s an insult.

This month, our Gear section focuses on gamer fashions (pg. 30), and quite frankly, I love it. The selection of items immediately convinced me that *Game Informer* needs a fashion section every month, because we aren’t a small group. We are the majority, so let’s let our freak flags fly, because gamers rule and don’t let anyone tell you any different.

Enjoy the issue.

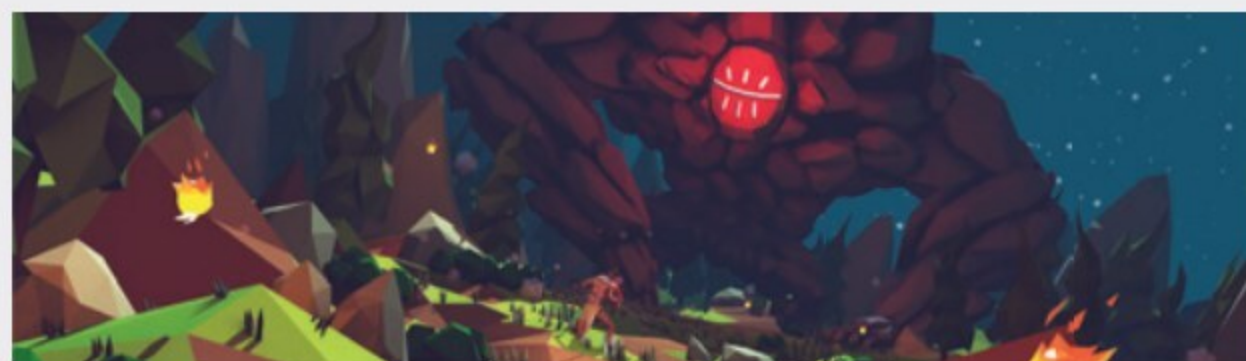
Cheers,



34 Dragon Ball FighterZ

Plenty of Dragon Ball video games have released in the franchise’s 30 years, but there is something special about FighterZ. We visited Bandai Namco in Japan to talk about the impact of the Dragon Ball video game franchise and learn how developer Arc System Works is making the best-looking Dragon Ball video game yet. **by Suriel Vazquez**

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We visited Nintendo to talk about its plans for bringing more indie games onto the Switch. Suda51, Yacht Club (the creators of Shovel Knight), and more all weighed in on the topic.



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The Xbox One X is the most powerful console in the world – but does that really matter?

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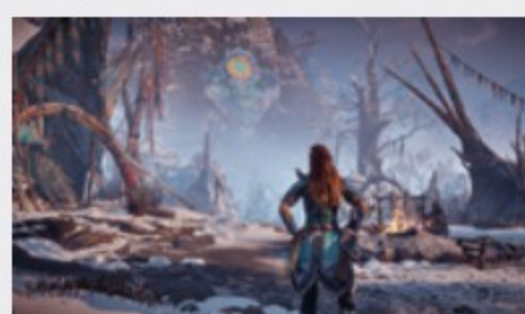
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Wolfenstein's cast is getting larger for part two, so we put together a list of the friends and foes joining in B.J. Blazkowicz's next episode.



50 Super Mario Odyssey
We played four new worlds, including Cascade Kingdom, home to the T. rex seen in the game's E3 trailer.



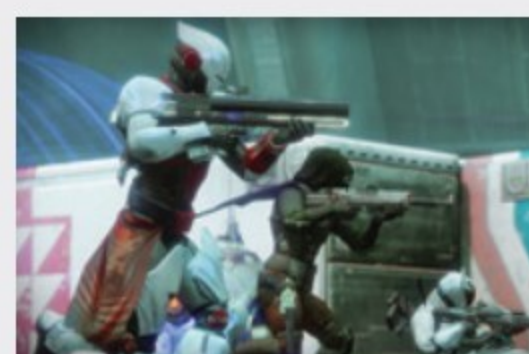
46 The History Of Dragon Ball Video Games
We spoke with Bandai Namco, who has published more than 40 Dragon Ball games in America alone, about why the long-running franchise has resonated for so long.



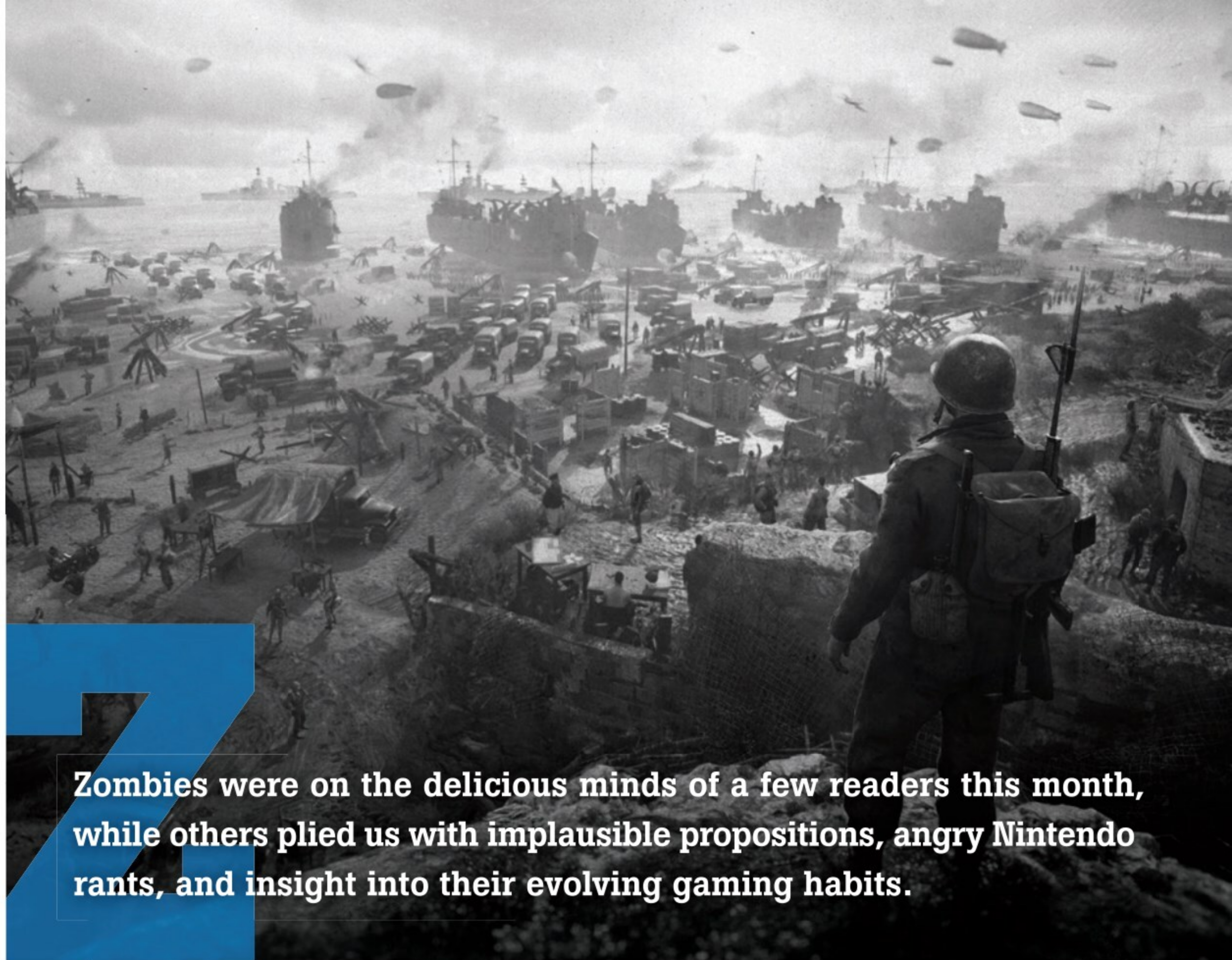
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Guerrilla Games gives us the inside scoop on what's next for Aloy.



62 Secret of Mana
Square Enix is remaking one of its best Super Nintendo RPGs. Is it worth revisiting?



72 Destiny 2
Bungie's follow-up is a marked improvement over its predecessor.



Zombies were on the delicious minds of a few readers this month, while others plied us with implausible propositions, angry Nintendo rants, and insight into their evolving gaming habits.

The Best Kind Of Zombie

When I got issue 293 (holy crap, you're getting close to 300 issues!) and saw that Call of Duty was going back to World War II, I got really excited! With this year's game, Zombies mode will be going back to where it started. Do you remember that one crazy moment in World at War when you beat the campaign and then out of nowhere you got a Nazi Zombies mode? That was nuts! As time went by the Zombies mode just became more advanced and kinda confusing (I'm looking at you, Advanced Warfare). I still liked it, but I missed the classic feel. Now we're getting a Zombies mode that's going to be awesome and have that World War II feel again. My dreams have come true!

Iain Klinefelter
via email

It's a little weird that your dream come true involves Nazi zombies, but we're glad you're excited, Iain. For more on Call of Duty WWII and Sledgehammer's take on Zombies mode, head to gameinformer.com/codwwii.

Déjà BOO!

How can I combat the amazing disregard Nintendo has shown its customers by releasing an SNES Classic Edition when most of us couldn't even get the NES Classic? I was more

excited for that console than any modern-day release. I stood in line for it on day one. I monitored Amazon and other retail sites daily until it was discontinued, convinced that at some point I could find one. I was going to get one for myself, my wife, my son, daughter, brother – and one for the shelf just to look cool. Why not at that price point? I thought this would be on the store shelf with Monopoly and Life, offering the world the joy of the NES until the end of time. Instead, Nintendo discontinues it. I was truly upset about it and still am to this day. After all that, following it up with an also-impossible-to-get SNES Classic is a slap in the face. What can we do as gamers to tell Nintendo this is not okay?

Ben Grose
via email

Normally we'd say that the best way to combat a company's bad business practices is to simply not participate in it, by refusing to buy said product. Given Nintendo's penchant for understocking its products, however, no one would even notice. That said, Nintendo is pledging to increase stock of the SNES Classic, and has announced it will bring back the NES Classic next summer. Time will tell if there's actually enough to go around, but if not, we'll happily publish more reader rants to drive the issue home.

A Modest Proposal

I know none of the editors at G.I. work for Blizzard, but I just thought this was a cool idea. I think Overwatch should have a story campaign for each character that goes through their lives before their current state in the game. It could also award a skin for each character whose story the player completes. It would be a nice change of pace for when I don't feel like waiting in a queue or playing around in training mode.

Katherine Moonblood
via email

Creating 25 different story campaigns for Overwatch's super-sized cast is kind of a big ask, but if Blizzard was crazy enough to do it, we sure as heck would play them. In the meantime, fans will probably have to settle for (slightly) more story-focused Overwatch events like Uprising.



Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



Arts & Entertainment

Could you make two magazines? You do a good job of covering all different kinds of video games, but increasingly when I go to interact with other fans I find there is a growing gulf between people who see games as art and those who just see them as entertainment. Thus you could have *Entertainment Game Informer* for those who just play for fun or a challenge, and *Art Game Informer* for those looking for something more meaningful. People could read and interact with what they prefer depending on if they are looking for spectacle and explosions or story and emotions.

Tim Malone
Meadville, Pennsylvania

Numerous readers have asked if we could create separate magazines for kids and adults over the years, but this is the first time anyone has proposed dividing up our content by how much readers want to use their noggins. Regardless, we at Game Informer feel it's our duty to expose our readers to all kinds of ideas and opinions, from feelings to fart jokes, to how we feel about fart jokes (we like them). If a particular article doesn't speak to you, you're always free to turn the page!

So You're Saying There's A Chance...

I loved your list of unlikely games that you want to see made (The Longshots, issue 293). This is the kind of content I crave. And since you brought it up, I've long wished for a true RPG in the World of Warcraft universe. Though I've mostly quit the MMO, I still voraciously consume the lore: the novels, film, comic books, and the ongoing Chronicle series of "textbooks." The way I see it, the launch title for such a series (like I said, longshot) is already written in the short-lived comic series. I'm imagining a Dragon Age-esque party RPG to experience first-hand the return of Lo'Gosh/King Varian, as you assemble a party including Broll Bearmantle, Valeera Sanguinar, that dwarf they pick up in Menethil Harbor, and even Prince Anduin. This thing writes itself, and with so many Azeroth lore fans, I imagine it would be a hot seller across platforms.

Steven Brezenoff
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Well, we've been waiting year after year, and as more time passes, the less likely it is that the infamous Half-Life 2: Episode 3 will ever be released. However, I was still surprised that the game didn't at least get an honorable mention in your Longshots article. I can see why you would leave it out since everyone has discussed it to death, but it still seems odd not to include this evasive title.

Isaac Gilley
North Carolina

We did indeed omit the legendary Half-Life sequel in favor of more interesting entries – because really, what is there to say about it anymore? However, in a surprise twist, former Half-Life designer and writer Marc Laidlaw surreptitiously posted his synopsis of Half-Life 2: Episode 3's intended storyline on his blog this month. So in a way, you can finally play through it – even 4K visuals can't compete with your imagination!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Wait, WHAT?! Scott Cawthon ended the Five Nights At Freddy's series?!"

Yep.

"Can you see them making a Suffering 3?"

Reply hazy, try again.

"Do you know when Borderlands 3 is coming out?"

We know when it's not coming out (any-time soon).

Worst Subject Line To A Feedback Letter:

"i quit match wwe 13"

Question Of The Month:

If you could only buy one more game in 2017, what would it be and why?

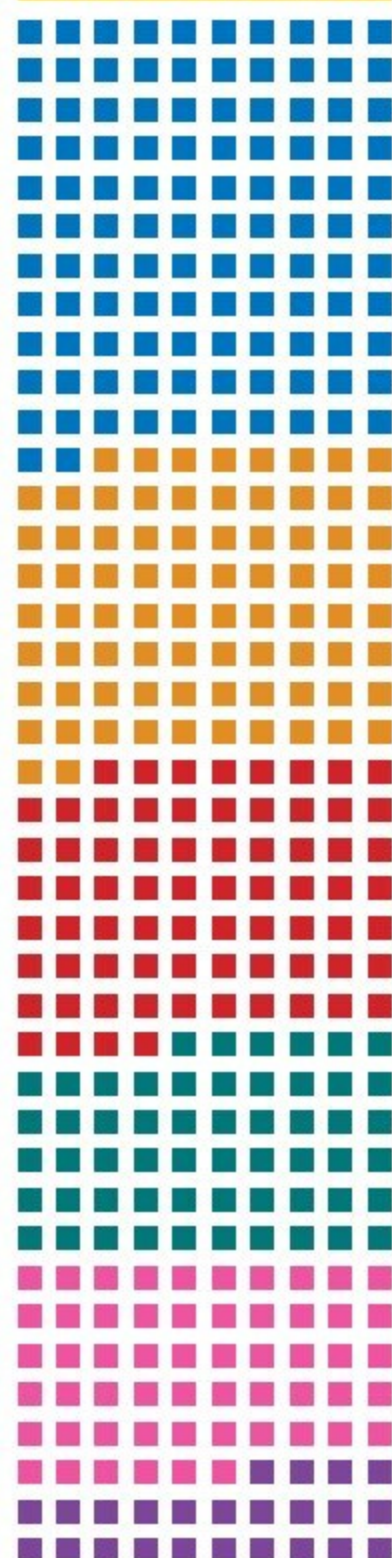
gi spy



(Left) This month we got the full rundown on Dragonball FighterZ from producers Ryo Mito, Masayuki Hirano, and Tomoko Hiroki.

(Right) Suriel also fused his essence with Arc System Works' Junyo Motomura, so we guess he's the director of the game now?

On Your Mind



- Habit Changes
- Gaming-Deprived Parents
- Pokémon Fans
- Longshot Love
- Call Of Duty Doters (Sorry)
- "Friday The 13th Is Good Now!"



This Changes Everything

In issue 293, we asked readers what the most significant change to their gaming habits has been over the years. One agent of change proved particularly prevalent among respondents, and it comes with a loaded diaper.

In a word, children. There was a sudden drop in my free time when they arrived. Among other things, I find myself only playing games that can be put down at a moment's notice and don't require any significant amount of concentration – so basically, I switched from console gaming to mobile gaming. I'm hopeful I'll eventually get to switch back one day.

Nikki B.

I've gradually become a latecomer rather than an early adopter. I used to get new games and consoles as soon as I could find them. Now, I wait to see how they review, and also tend to wait for price drops. I suppose this has to do with growing up and having more responsibilities than I used to. My wife enjoys gaming

too, though, so sometimes she surprises me by wanting the same games I do.

John Enfield

I developed a repetitive stress injury in my right hand, which makes it painful to hold a controller normally. I've been learning to play turn-based games like Persona 5 with one hand and more active games with the controller on my lap like an arcade stick. The learning curve has been high, leading to many a mob surrounding me in Persona, but I'm getting there.

Rachel Kohler

My most significant change has been my foray into more mature games. Being a rather young gamer (I'm 11), I mostly played Mario and titles like that, but recently after getting my PS4, I started to dive into more mature titles like the Uncharted series. I am currently asking my parents to let me play Call of Duty. While I still enjoy Nintendo games, I think my interest is changing to titles for older gamers.

Gable Coe

(Left) Andy, Shea, and Kim met a bunch of awesome G.I. fans at this year's GameStop Expo, along with Battlefield II star Janina Gavankar and EA's Andrew Wong.

(Right) Shea also chatted with Suda51 about his new No More Heroes sequel (see page 68). Will he ever stop making developers flash stupid hand signs?



WINNER

1 Jessica Chiodo

Smurfette ain't got nothing on Princess Midna.

2 Tomi Shishido

This is what we always imagined a picture of Lara Croft trying to Indiana Jones-steal a Yoshi egg as Gollum pickpockets her lightsaber would look like.

3 Aaron Austin

You might only be seven years old, Aaron, but you really nailed Wario's likeness.

4 Tiana Prince

And here's...another mashup of everything you loved about your childhood. Figure it out yourself.



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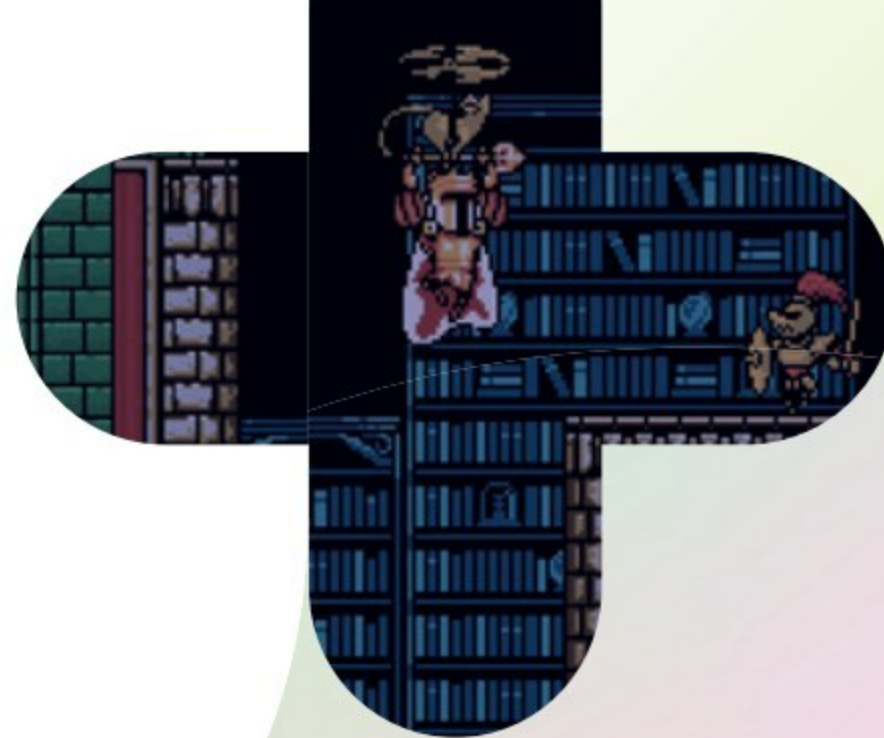


(Left) Ben Reeves was locked and loaded when he met up with Ubisoft's Davide Soliani and Xavier Manzanares. **(Right)** This month we bid farewell to the most synchronized intern crew in G.I. history. Clockwise from left: Douglas Delong, Craig Taylor, and Jared Koncsol. Thanks, guys!

connect

NOTABLES

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Falling Behind

The Wii U was notorious for its lack of third-party titles. Near the end of its lifecycle, players were provided with a barren wasteland, where months passed between major new releases. Due to poor sales, a difficult-to-develop-for infrastructure, and a form factor many viewed as a half-measure, the Wii U was not viewed as a destination platform by triple-A publishers or independent developers.

In the past couple of years, Nintendo has made it a mission to try and change that perception of its hardware. In early 2016, Damon Baker stepped in as head of partner management for the publisher and developer-relations department after nearly 10 years of working in licensing and marketing. Ever since, Baker has pushed to improve relationships with third-party publishers at Nintendo.

Baker says that while it may seem counterintuitive, the third-party department never had a dedicated account-management team and instead relied on connections the team members brought in with developers through the relationships they've established. "For the last two years, I've been asked to head up this initiative, at least here in North America, to reach out to different publishers, from triple-A publishers all the way to independent developers, and evangelize what [Switch] is all about," Baker says.

If all goes well with the initiative, the hope is that Nintendo can attract more third-party talent than ever before. The Switch could break the cycle of this traditionally weak area for Nintendo, especially if it becomes a destination platform for indies. Nintendo thinks it has the right formula for success with Switch, and the developer hype surrounding the platform backs up that confidence.



Making The Switch

Though Baker openly admits the Switch being a shiny, new platform is a good way to attract developers, he claims the way the team operates now isn't too different from how it did near the Wii U's final days. Late in the Wii U cycle, we saw some new approaches to court more third parties, with tactics like providing Wii U owners the ability to download several indie game demos and try them out at home during E3 2015. However, with poor sales and an unfriendly framework, it was too little to save the sinking Wii U ship.

While it's too early to tell if the Switch will ultimately be different, the platform seems like it's on the

right path. Instead of attributing any kind of radical new approaches, Baker feels that the Switch is a much friendlier platform to developers. He acknowledges that while Switch has a lot of hype surrounding it since launch, several additional reasons are to thank for the influx of third-party developers – particularly indie developers – flocking to the Switch.

"Developers could certainly go to any of our competitors and have a much larger install base to work with," Baker says. "The reason why they're really interested in working with us is because of some of the features and functionality [of Switch], but it's also because we've created a framework that is much

easier for these developers to bring their content over."

The fact that the Switch is a home console with portable capabilities is attractive to many developers, including indie publisher Adult Swim Games, which is bringing Trinket Studios' Battle Chef Brigade to Switch this year. "Indie games can generally be consumed in smaller chunks than triple-A games," associate product manager at Adult Swim Games Jacob Paul says. "I think it's the perfect platform for pick-up-and-play as people are going on the bus or on planes."

The technical side of the Switch is also attractive to developers. Frozenbyte has plenty of experience with Nintendo's platforms,



Damon Baker





Super Meat Boy Forever

having brought Trine and Trine 2 to Wii U, and Has-Been Heroes and the upcoming Nine Parchments to Switch. “Switch is much easier to develop for than the Wii U,” says marketing manager Kai Tuovinen. “They have the Unreal and Unity support as well, so those guys who are using those engines can easily bring their games. Also for people like ourselves who are using our own engine, it’s really easy for us to put our games on Switch as well.”

Though Team Meat, the developers behind Super Meat Boy and the forthcoming Super Meat Boy Forever, never released anything on Wii U, CEO and lead programmer Tommy Refenes says Switch is incredibly easy to port games to, calling Nintendo’s leap ahead from the Wii development tools “night and day.” “I ported [Super Meat Boy Forever] in like two days – from nothing to working in two days,” he says. “Microsoft used to always be the people with the crazy good tools because they make Windows, so of course they’re going to have good stuff, but Switch’s tools... I’m legitimately surprised by how well-thought-out everything was.”

While Refenes implies that Nintendo is eclipsing Microsoft in terms of developer-friendly framework, he also asserts that Nintendo is overtaking Sony in a completely different area of supporting its indie developers: promotion.

Coming Attractions

Nintendo has made a conscious effort to attract more independent developers to Switch. Below is just a sampling of the massive list of indies slotted to appear on Nintendo's console/handheld hybrid.

2017 Releases

- Battle Chef Brigade
(Adult Swim)
- Dragon Marked for Death
(Inti Creates)
- Floor Kids
(Merj Media)
- Nine Parchments
(Frozenbyte)
- Sausage Sports Club
(Luckshot Games)
- Yono and the Celestial Elephants
(Plug In Digital)
- Morpie's Law
(Cosmoscope)
- Mom Hid my Game!
(Kemco)
- Poly Bridge
(Dry Cactus)
- Dandara
(Raw Fury)
- HuntDown
(Coffeestain)
- Runbow
(13AM Games)
- Hollow Knight
(Team Cherry)
- ICEY
(XD Network)
- Innerspace
(Aspyr Media)
- Rogue Trooper Redux
(Rebellion)
- Stardew Valley
(Chucklefish)
- The End is Nigh
(Nicalis)
- Tiny Metal (Area35)
- Unbox
(Prospect Games)
- Uurnog Uurnlimited
(Raw Fury)
- Worms WMD
(Team17)
- Crypt of the Necrodancer: Nintendo Switch Edition
(Brace Yourself Games)
- Enter the Gungeon
(Devolver Digital)

2018 Releases

- Kentucky Route Zero: TV Edition
(Annapurna Interactive)
- Mulaka
(Lienzo)
- Shovel Knight: King of Cards
(Yacht Club Games)
- Super Meat Boy Forever
(Team Meat)
- Light Fingers
(Numismatic)
- Next Up Hero
(Aspyr Media)
- Away
(Plug In Digital)
- Runner3
(Choice Provisions)
- Wargroove
(Chucklefish)
- Asura
(Ogre Head)
- Celeste
(MattMakesGames)
- Flat Heroes
(Deck 13)
- A Knight's Quest
(Curve)
- ToeJam & Earl
(Adult Swim)
- Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes
(Grasshopper Manufacture)



Battle Chef Brigade



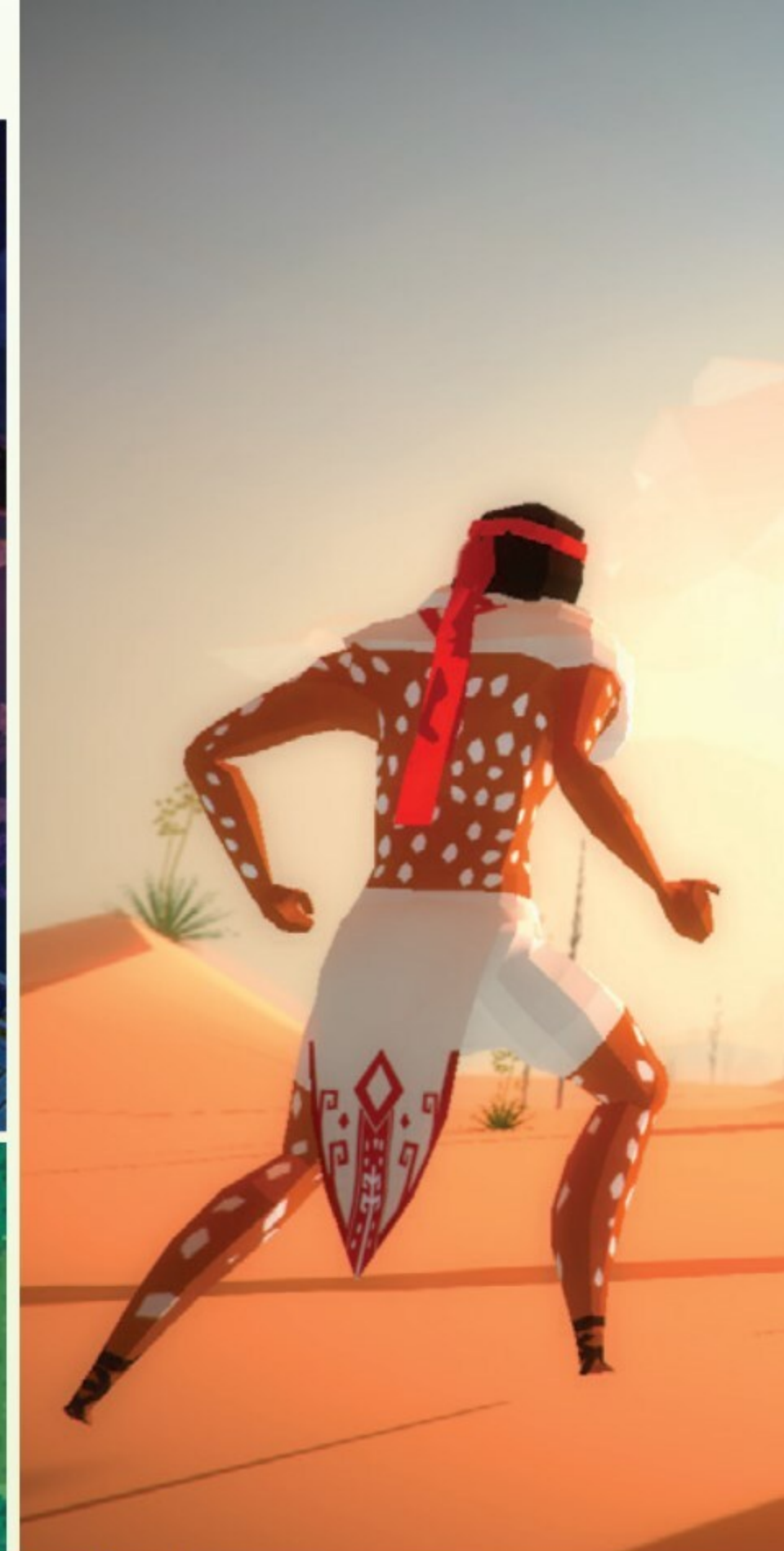
Nine Parchments



Golf Story



Sausage Sports Club



Spreading The Word

Refenes isn't alone in his feelings. Many other developers who are releasing games on Switch shared the notion that Nintendo is going above and beyond from a promotional standpoint. "Over the past two years, I've seen how much Nintendo has been putting into getting the word out about indies and trying to help the indie community get more popular and get more support," says Goichi Suda, CEO of Grasshopper Manufacture and director of Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes. "It's really obvious to me that Nintendo has really started caring more about indies."

The promotion of indie developers by Nintendo came to a head in late August at PAX West 2017. Not only did Nintendo host its annual "Nindies @ Night" event, where fans could play upcoming independent games on Nintendo platforms on the eve of the expo, but it also set up a dedicated Nindies Arcade at the convention center where PAX attendees could take a break from the main showfloor and play a curated collection of indie games. However, the biggest promotion came in the form of a Nindies Showcase video that corresponded with PAX, where Baker introduced players to a host of independent titles coming to Switch.



Mulaka

“We’re always looking at unique vehicles to be able to promote this great content,” Baker says. “We also have a program where we have a free hardware-allocation program for our partners. So, if they’re attending their own events, they’re attending other shows, we can give them the hardware they need to show off their own content independently.”

Refenes felt that eagerness to help indie developers firsthand when he put feelers out to the platform holders to see if there was interest in debuting new Super Meat Boy Forever information at PAX and Nintendo scooped it up immediately.

“It used to be Sony was the one that was pushing the indie devs so much,” he says. “I think Nintendo is pushing harder than Sony is now. [...] I think right now they’re just offering more exposure.”

Tuovinen agrees Nintendo’s approach to promoting indies is special. “The support from Nintendo for different events and promotions is overwhelming,” he says. “We really couldn’t be happier with how things are.”

For publisher Adult Swim Games and developer Lienzo, Nintendo’s rapport with its fans is a big advantage over its competitors. “When Nintendo speaks and calls out

a game for being good, the fans really listen,” Paul says. “It’s a very dedicated fan base.”

Edgar Serrano, director and game designer at indie developer Lienzo agrees that having Nintendo’s approval is something that can translate to success within its fan community. “Once you’re in with Nintendo, it generally boosts up your visibility and people care more about it because if Nintendo gives you something to work with, then it must mean that your game is worth it,” Serrano says.

Baker understands that Nintendo’s hardcore fan base outshines any promotional help his

team can give or unique traits the Switch may possess. “As much marketing or PR support that any of us can possibly give to any particular game or any particular franchise, the strongest message out there is the word-of-mouth messaging,” he says. “That’s more powerful than anything we could do.”

For many of the bigger indie games coming to Switch, retro-gaming experiences from past Nintendo platforms like Advance Wars and Mega Man serve as the core inspiration for games like Wargroove and Shovel Knight, while Super Meat Boy Forever capitalizes on Nintendo’s long history with platformers. Because of this built-in player base that has this preexisting love for these genres, many indies see the Switch as a great fit for their games.

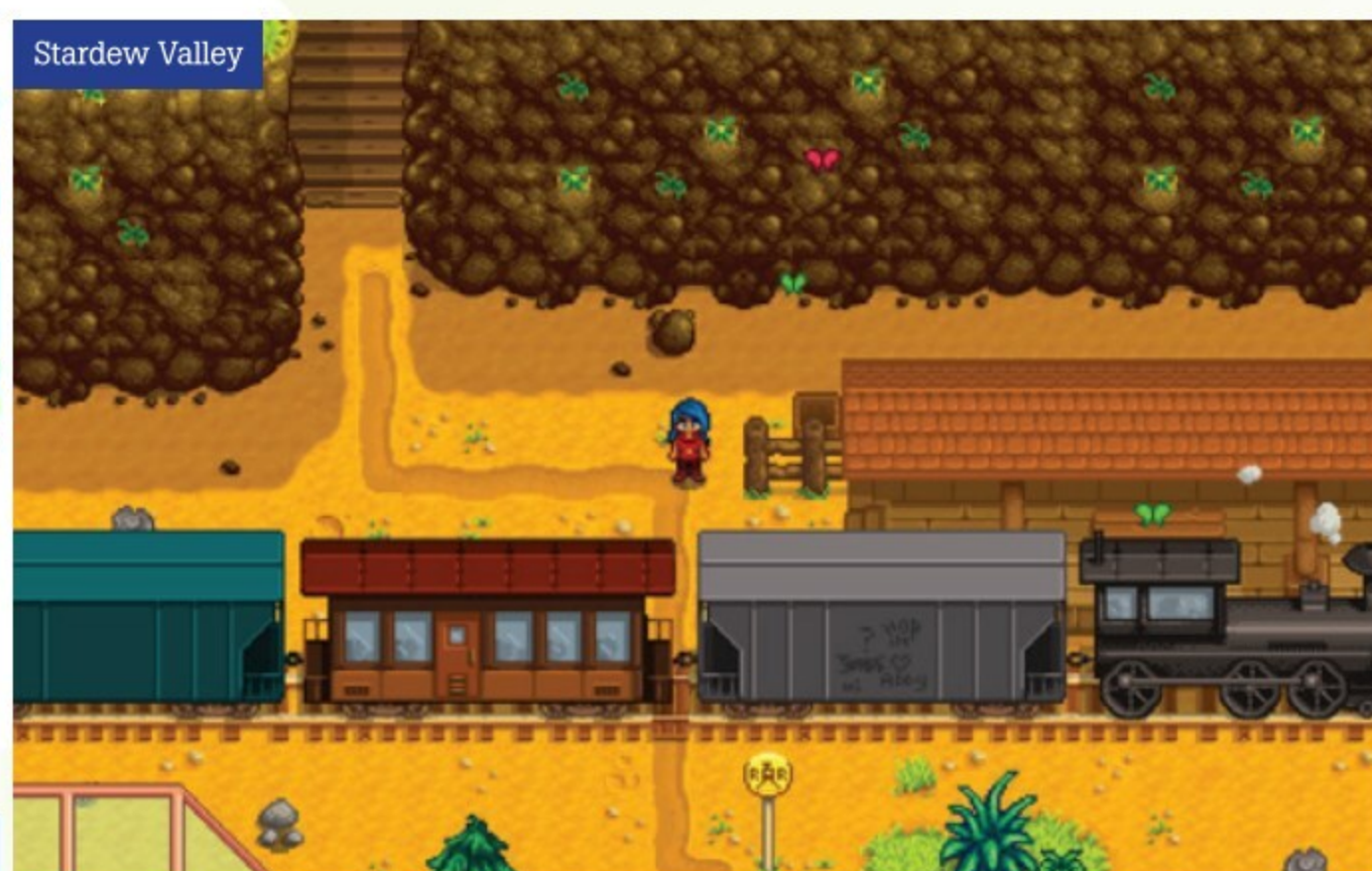
“It definitely seems like an ideal platform [for Wargroove],” says Chucklefish community manager Tom Katkus. “In a way, a game like this, it’s almost like coming home, coming back to a Nintendo system. I think everyone in the studio would have felt we were underserving everyone if we didn’t have it on a Nintendo system.”

Baker also believes that indie titles like Wargroove and Shovel Knight that draw inspiration from classic titles from Nintendo’s past are perfect fits for Switch’s player base. “I think they share a very similar audience,” he says. “There are a ton of fans on Nintendo Switch that are huge fans of Zelda and Mario and Metroid and all these other franchises that have come out in the past. It’s very natural that new games that are inspired by some of those franchises or that type of creativity would also do well on the system.”

The special connection Nintendo has is not only limited to its fans, as multiple developers say that it carries into the way the company deals with its stable of developers.



Shovel Knight: King of Cards



Stardew Valley

Keeping Things Personal

Another key factor that was brought up repeatedly by various indie developers is how Nintendo delivers a more personal touch in its approach. From the company's presence at conventions like Japan's BitSummit to actual visits to indie studios across the globe, many developers feel personally catered to in ways not seen with other major companies.

I witnessed the rapport Baker, who serves as a point-of-contact with Nintendo for several of these developers, has with Suda for myself. As Suda and Baker's paths cross, I watch as the two stop to compliment each other's sneakers and make small talk.

Suda says he feels that the team at Nintendo has shown that they really care about the No More Heroes series. He says that it culminated with an invitation to be included in the full reveal of the Switch system in January. "In my entire career as a video game creator, I've never had that chance before," Suda says. "I've never had a platform or company really show that they care about my games or my series this much, and really offer this much support for it. I really appreciate that and it's one of the reasons I'm really glad to be working with Nintendo. They show that they do care. That sort of care is something that I'm able to receive from Nintendo that I don't really think I'd get from anywhere else."

This approach allows Nintendo to not only keep lines of communication open with its developers, but



Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

also get early visibility into projects and offer suggestions about direction or what players are looking for. "I think it's refreshing for a lot of our partners, and I think it helps us establish lifelong relationships with these developers," Baker says.

Part of establishing a long-standing relationship with independent developers is understanding what best serves the developer. Baker says that while Nintendo loves having third-party games from indies arrive exclusively on Switch, his team doesn't force developers to go that route unless it makes sense for them. That holds true,

as many of the developers featured in Nintendo's indie lineup are also releasing on other platforms. "We know that every one of these independent developers needs to make business decisions that are right for them," he says.

Going Worldwide

Though Nintendo Switch still lacks in third-party titles when compared to other platforms, the strides the company is making are undeniable. Baker says the team will continue to support independent developers while keeping Nintendo's core philosophy of

bringing games for everyone.

Nintendo hopes to further its attempts to make this initiative more globally focused by removing barriers for developers to get their games in additional regions. Previously, developers often needed an existing entity in Japan to release a game in the Japanese market, but through this new global approach, games like Shovel Knight, which are a good fit for the Japanese market, have been able to release on Nintendo platforms.

At the end of the day, Nintendo still has work to do. For all its progress in securing more third parties and big-name independent developers, many have still yet to jump in with both feet. The age-old argument from Nintendo fans that nobody buys a Nintendo system for the third-party games holds less water with each generation. Thankfully, Baker knows that while the first-party offerings from Nintendo are undeniably strong, not everyone is going to be interested in the latest Mario or Zelda game.

"It's our job to go out there and find the things that [the players] are interested in and the types of genres that they can sink their teeth into," Baker says. "Already there's an amazing catalog of content available. When I look at what's coming out over the next couple of years and the stuff that we've even just most recently announced, people are going to be spending a lot of money on eShop because there's so much great stuff to choose from," Baker says with a laugh. "We really do believe that there's something for everyone." ♦

Wargroove





Morgan Freeman
SU2C Ambassador
Executive Producer
of the documentary,
The C Word

Tonya Peat
Cancer Survivor

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TheCWordMovie.com



Stand Up To Cancer is a program of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Please talk to your healthcare provider about appropriate screenings for your age, sex, family history and risk factors; and about clinical trials that may be right for you. Photo by Nigel Parry

The Good



THE NINTENDO SWITCH is getting an influx of titles: L.A. Noire (November 14), the 2016 reboot of Doom (2017), and the surprise announcement of Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus (2018). In other Nintendo news, the company says that it will release shipments of the discontinued NES Classic Edition in the summer of 2018.

The Bad

BRUCE STRALEY, director of Uncharted 2 and The Last of Us at developer Naughty Dog, is leaving the studio. Straley hasn't announced his next move, but we thank him for his work so far and wish him all the best in his future endeavors.



Quotable

"If you're a bad person doing bad things in Overwatch, we don't want you in Overwatch."



Jeff Kaplan,
Overwatch game
director.
connect 16



YouTube star **PEWDIEPIE** (Felix Kjellberg) has once again courted controversy, this time saying a racial slur during a livestream of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. He apologized for the remark saying that it was uttered in the "heat of the moment," and that there were no excuses for what he did. Still, this is a pattern for Kjellberg, who has engaged in anti-Semitic stunts and jokes in the past. 💎

The Ugly



Fallout 4

Prepare for the Great War!

We have everything a savvy Vault-dweller
such as yourself needs to be prepared.
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BALLS

by Jeff Cork



Poké Ball

Pokémon

Even though this iconic sphere is used to capture wild Pokémon, don't consider it a trap. Gamefreak has assured us that a Poké Ball's interior space is "incredibly comfortable" for the monsters. Think of it as a tiny luxury condo that wiggles before the front door locks.



The Ball

Pong

Pong's easy-to-grasp gameplay captivated players in the '70s, first in arcades and then in various home versions. It looks primitive now, but don't get hung up on the visuals; if football has taught us anything, it's that balls don't have to be round.



The Traveler

Destiny

The next time you double-jump into the air or use your Ghost to pull up your next waypoint, take a moment to thank the Traveler. This mysterious sphere gave Destiny's Guardians their otherworldly power, and appropriately made it possible to colonize planets far from Earth.



Blitzball

Final Fantasy X

Are you ready for some Blitzball? Wakka is a fantastic ambassador for the Spiran sport, showing off its versatility as both a fun pastime and combat style. And none of it would be possible without the nubby Blitzball itself.



Katamari

Katamari Damacy

Is it magnetic? Suction powered? Dipped in lollipop juice? We may never know why the Prince's katamari ball is quite so attractive to everything it touches, but one thing's for sure: This thing could roll up everything else on this list without breaking a sweat.



Monkey Balls

Super Monkey Ball

Their transparent design makes it abundantly clear that the plastic spheres from the Monkey Ball series aren't "incredibly comfortable." Thankfully, these platforming primates don't seem to mind. As long as Baby keeps that diaper on, we're good.



Bumper Balls

Mario Party

There's something particularly satisfying about baiting an opponent into rolling toward you and scooting out of the way at the last possible second. Bumper Balls may not offer the most long-term enjoyment, but it's a standout minigame that brought a smile whenever it came into rotation.



Cerebral Bore

Turok 2: Seeds of Evil

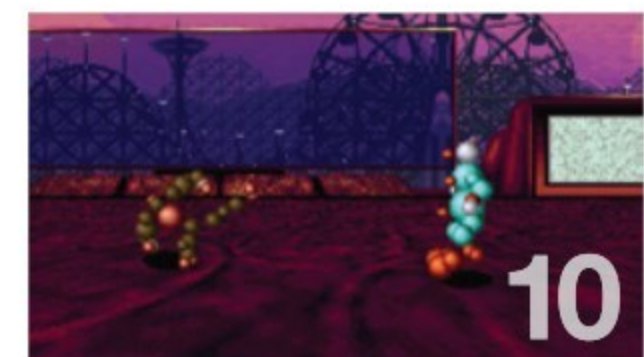
Yes, it's basically the silver ball from the Phantasm movies, but anyone who played split-screen Turok 2 multiplayer knows the Cerebral Bore's appeal. Watching an opponent's brain pulse out of their forehead was a gory way to score a point. Or it was unbelievably cheap.



Yami

Okami

You don't need to cut an imposing profile to convey power, as Yami demonstrated. Don't let its circular silhouette fool you; this foe had a variety of deadly tricks contained within its myriad panels. What's inside? Not what you may expect.



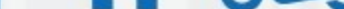
Yoko

Ballz

In terms of sheer quantity, it's hard to beat Ballz. This SNES fighting game eschewed polygons in favor of characters that were composed entirely of — wait for it — balls. Yoko the monkey had a particularly humiliating path to victory: debilitating foes by flinging round poo at them. 🍌



GREAT
COVERAGE
IN JUST
A FEW WORDS



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The Games Of PAX West 2017

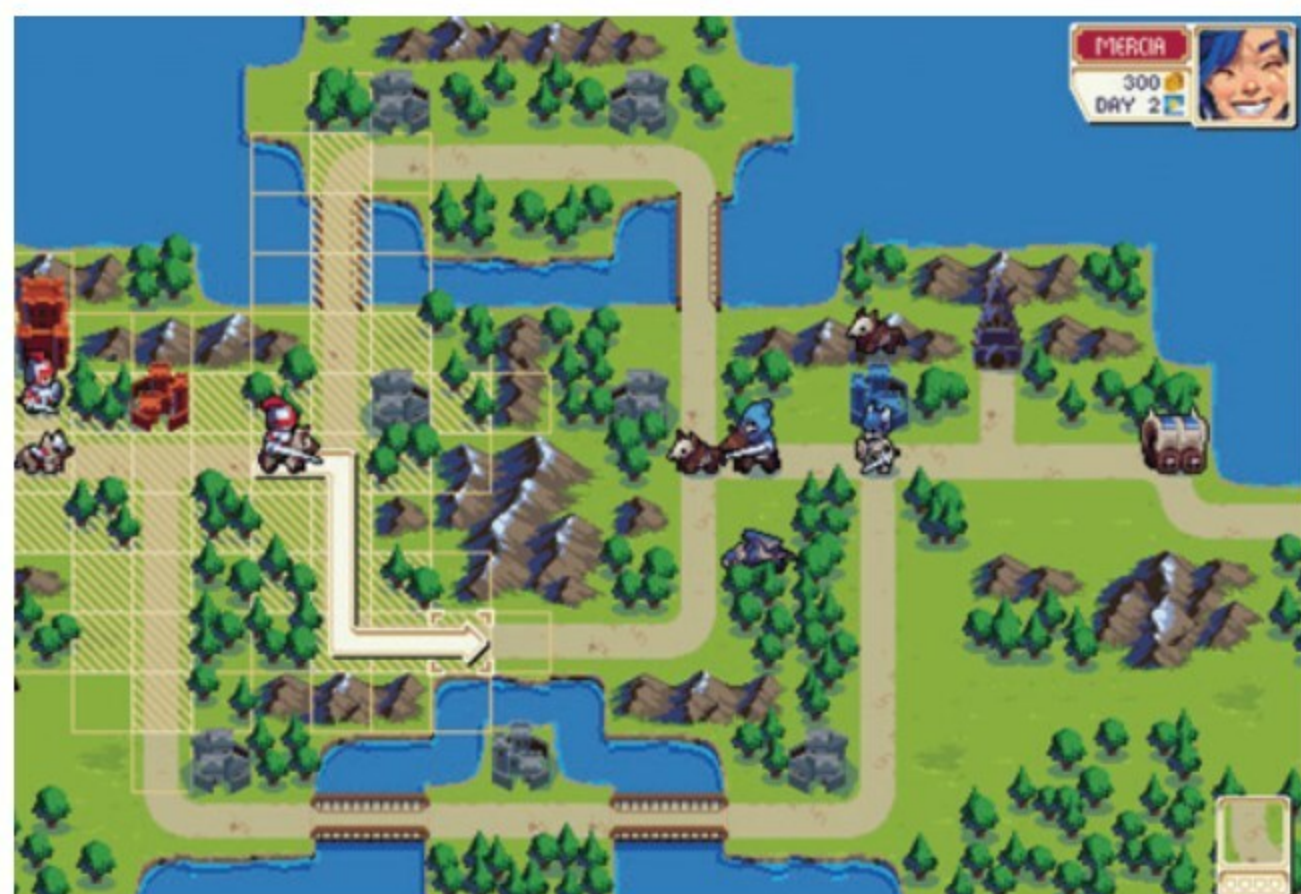
The original PAX show in Seattle has grown as a hotbed for indie developers to show off their latest projects and connect directly with the fans who will one day play their games. This year's event was no different, and we came away with plenty of exciting titles on our minds. Check out some of our favorites.

by Game Informer Staff

Wargroove

Platform: Xbox One • Switch • PC

It's been nine years since we received a new Advance Wars title, but Chucklefish, the developer behind Starbound, is poised to help you scratch that itch. Much like Advance Wars, Wargroove is a turn-based strategy game where up to four players guide their units through the map in an effort to secure victory. The most basic way to win is by capturing the enemy stronghold. However, in a new twist, Wargroove also allows you to win by taking out the enemy captain, meaning you must not only protect your fortress, but your commanding unit as well. Since the captain is a very powerful combatant, this new fold challenges you to balance your aggression, as you don't want to lead them into the frontlines only to have them targeted by your opponent and wiped out. We thoroughly enjoyed our time with Wargroove, and can't wait to play more when it launches in early 2018.



The Swords of Ditto

Platform: PS4 • PC

Developer Onebitbeyond wears its Zelda inspiration on its sleeve, but The Swords of Ditto approaches the same gameplay and concepts in unique ways. You travel through a world fighting exotic creatures and clearing out procedurally generated dungeons, but rather than delivering a sprawling adventure, a single playthrough only takes a couple of hours. Each time you beat the game, your next playthrough is a little brighter, as the big bad's influence is lessened, and a statue is erected in the town square to commemorate the champion's victory before your next hero's quest to save the world begins.

If you die, it's game over, and your subsequent playthrough reflects the enemy's victory; the town is more run-down and the bad guys have more control over the world. Throughout your journey, you accumulate weapons that range from Zelda-inspired fare like bows and bombs, to over-the-top weapons like a summoned giant robot foot that smashes down on top of the target. The concept of victory or defeat affecting the world over the course of multiple playthroughs is interesting, and we're hoping the sword-slashing adventure still feels fresh when it releases next year.

Sinner: Sacrifice for Redemption

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Imagine a Dark Souls-esque game without exploration or leveling up. *Sinner: Sacrifice for Redemption* is just bosses – seven of them – and you can take them on in any order right from the start. The catch is, you need to make sacrifices. Every time you beat a boss, you're getting weaker, whether it's a health debuff or losing the ability to use items or abilities, so by the time you reach the final boss you're going to be a fragile shell of your original self. The bosses themselves are multi-stage affairs, with shifting environments and abilities that make each encounter much more than simply memorizing a few attacks.

Discovering the best order to do the bosses to suit your playstyle should be a captivating conundrum for players to tinker with when Dark Star's boss-battler hits console and PC early next year.



Survived By

Platform: PC

A free-to-play permadeath bullet hell MMORPG where your character is survived by hundreds and hundreds of ancestors? That's what Digital Extremes is bringing to the table with a closed alpha later this year. Up to 100 players can pile on a server and work together to level up, craft insane weapons, dungeon crawl, and more. When you die, you lose it all – almost. Some aspects of your ancestry live on in your successor on and on, to create a satisfying metagame where you advance just a bit through every crushing defeat, whether you only made it out the gates and were killed by a baby plant or when you went down taking on an epic boss with a swarm of your friends. The retro-style pixelated graphics allow gaggles of players and projectiles to splash across the screen for a fast-paced take on dungeon crawling, looting, and scooting.

Battle Chef Brigade

Platform: PS4 • Switch • PC

If you combined *Iron Chef* with a match-three game and action/RPG platformer, you'd have Trinket Studios' upcoming feast for the eyes, *Battle Chef Brigade*. Take on cooking tournaments by hunting ingredients out in the wild and preparing them in the perfect pot, swapping ingredients and mixing them in a bowl Bejeweled-style. During each day you can also work jobs and work on your relationships with various town members, earning money for better cooking accessories and unlocking new features.

Hand-drawn animated characters showcase the zany world where orcs face off with elves in a battle of culinary mastery. Take on tough challenges like dragons mid-tournament to get that zesty, spicy ingredient that will make your dish the best. *Battle Chef Brigade* is an unusual combination of game styles, but we're eager to see how the final recipe tastes later this year.



Pathologic 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC

The original *Pathologic* launched in 2005 and was instantly a cult classic thanks to its engrossing concept, casting you as one of three characters trying to cure a plague-ridden town of its illness over the course of 12 days. Over the years the game has received praise for being ahead of its time as an "art game" for its day cycle, weirdness, and dedication to the bleakness of its universe. The Kickstarted remake has been retitled *Pathologic 2*, in spite of it not being a sequel. Hosting a variety of fixes, including a beautiful new art style and upgraded visuals, *Pathologic 2* looks to maintain the original's quirks while smoothing out the edges and bringing its grim thrills to a new audience in 2018. After playing through both developer Ice Pick Lodge's prologue chapter *The Marble Nest* and recent PAX demo, we can say that this new version is shaping up to be worthy of the legacy of its predecessor, forcing players to weigh decisions and make difficult choices as they try to ward off an oppressive, seemingly unkillable disease. 💎



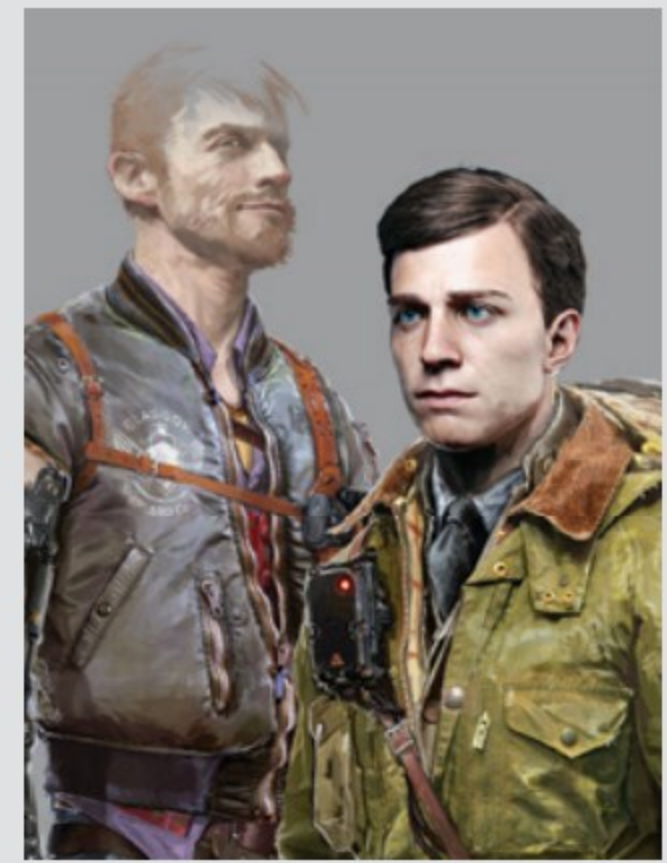
EXAMINING THE DOSSIER

*Running down the friends and foes in
Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*

When its reveal trailer debuted at E3 2017, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* left us with a lot of revelations as well as some questions. Anya is pregnant. B.J. is in a wheelchair. How has the world fared since the Resistance's pyrrhic victory at the end of *The New Order*? Is Caroline Becker dead? Why is Wyatt out of his gourd?

For the most part, MachineGames and Bethesda have been content to keep silent on details about these characters and what they're going through – until now. Jens Matthies, creative director of both *The New Order* and *The New Colossus*, talked to us about the stakes for our heroes and their journey to take back America from the Nazi regime.

by Javy Gwaltney



Fergus Reid & Probst Wyatt

The *New Order* opened with you choosing to save either Scottish pilot Fergus or naive American Infantryman Wyatt. Whoever lived shows up in *The New Colossus*, with both characters ragged by their experiences. Fergus, still sarcastic, now sports a prosthetic arm after a having what Matthies calls "quite an accident" while Wyatt is going on a soul-searching journey with the help of LSD.



The Ausmerzer

A massive airship used in the pacification of the United States, villain Frau Engel's ship is now essentially a "terrorist-hunting" vessel used to wipe out the resistance and hunt down B.J. himself. The ship is capable of moving rapidly between various places in the country and will no doubt be a constant terror during the campaign of *The New Colossus*.



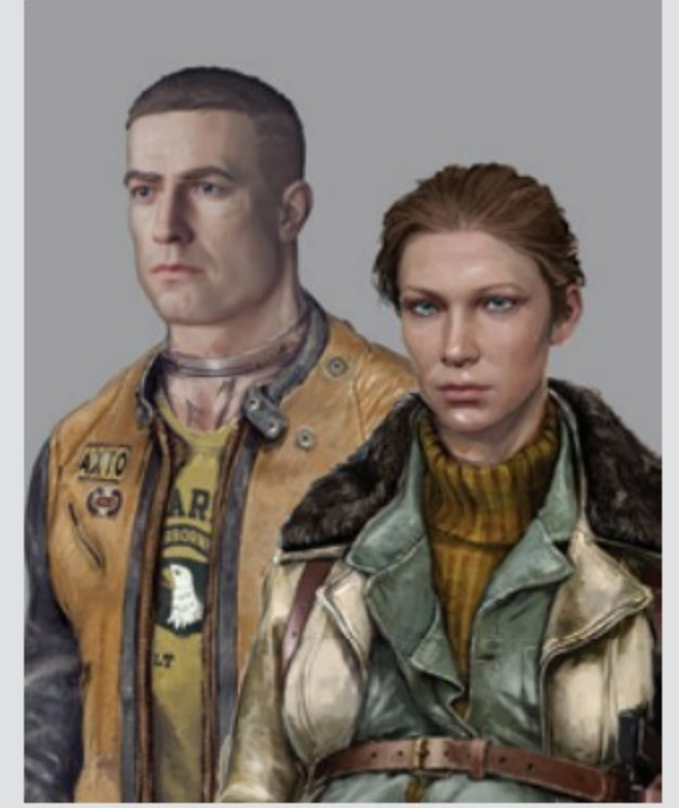
Grace

Since the fall of America to the Nazi regime, Grace has been working as the leader of a resistance group known as The Black Revolutionary Front in bomb-blasted Manhattan. She's fierce, witty, has a fondness for twisted practical jokes, and hates Nazis just as much as B.J. does. From what we've played of The New Colossus, Grace seems to be taking Caroline Becker's place as a resistance leader in this chapter of the series.



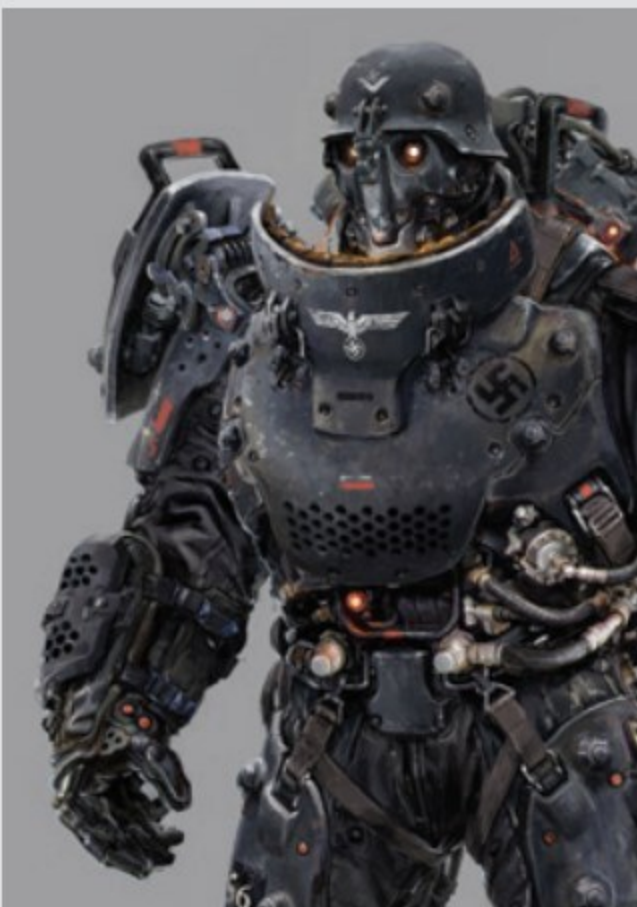
Horton Boon & Paris Jack

Horton is the leader of the resistance group in New Orleans, which the Nazis have turned into the ghetto, pushing a lot of "undesirable people" there. Bourbon-loving Horton works within the confines of this harsh environment to fight back and give the people who live there hope. Paris Jack, who Horton calls "a true anarchist and a hell of a clarinet player," lends his hands to the resistance effort as well.



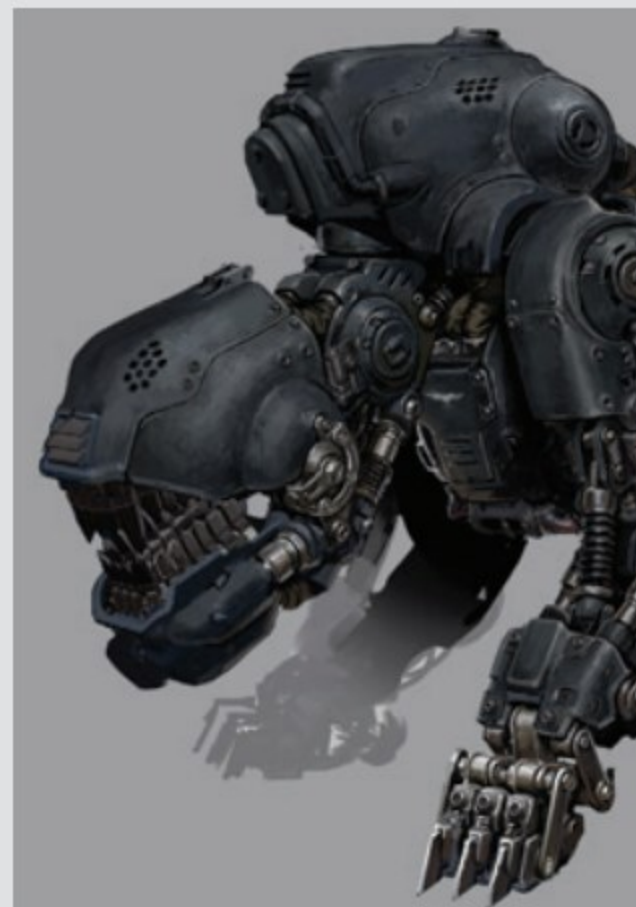
B.J. Blazkowicz & Anya Oliwa

Star-crossed, Nazi-murdering lovers B.J. and Anya find themselves on the verge of being parents. "It's quite a scary world to try and raise children in it," Matthies says. "I think that it adds some special urgency to trying to do something about the state of the world." Despite being pregnant, that doesn't stop Anya from being capable of taking it to the fascists as we've seen her stab Nazis in the crotch and blow their heads off with shotguns.



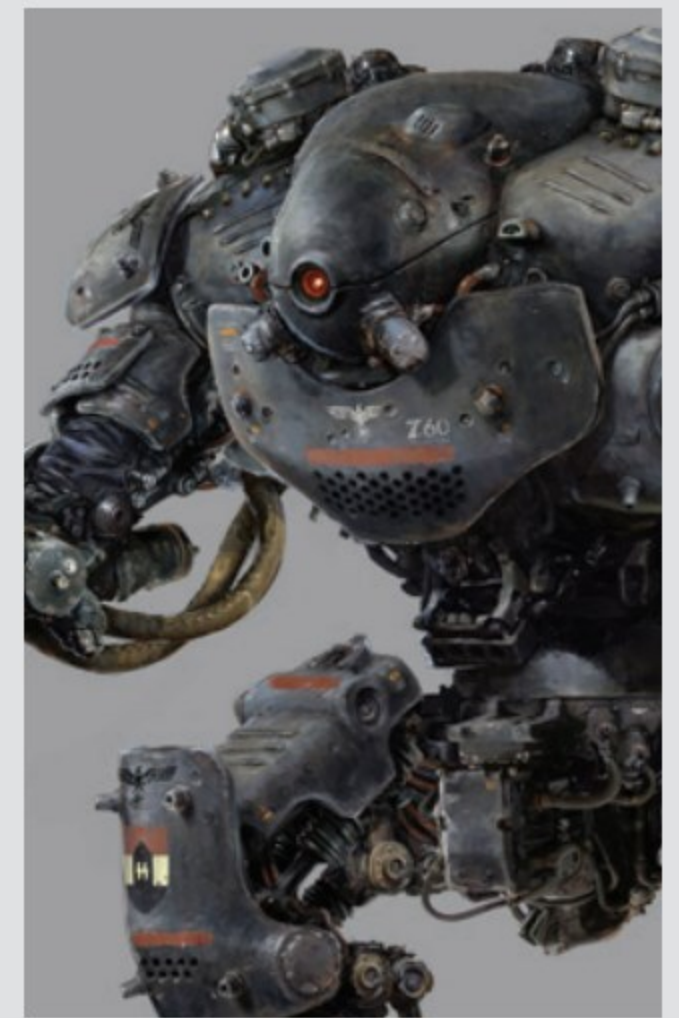
Nazi Soldiers

One of The New Order's biggest criticisms is that there wasn't enough enemy variety. The New Colossus changes that, with several kinds of soldiers, both man and machine, with various abilities. With jump packs, lasers, gatling guns, and several layers of armor, this new and improved army will provide a stiff challenge even for someone as experienced in stabbing Nazis as B.J.



Panzerhund

The Panzerhund, a massive steel dog with jaws capable of biting a full-grown man in half, returns in The New Colossus. We already knew that the game would have a fire-breathing variation thanks to E3 footage. However, there will also be a laser-firing version of the Panzerhund called, quite fittingly and straight to the point, a Lazerhund, which B.J. must contend with.



Zitadelle

The Zitadelle, German for "Citadel," is an armored robot armed with both a flamethrower and missiles. A massive enemy in the mold of classic id Software bosses like the Cyberdemon and Mecha-Hitler, players need to be crafty in their approach to taking out the hulking behemoth. 💎



The Xbox One X Primer

Everything we know about Microsoft's upcoming console

Getting gamers excited for a new console less than four years into the current generation of systems is a hard sell, and so far Microsoft hasn't made the strongest sales pitch for the Xbox One X. As with its predecessor, the Xbox One X reveal was undermined by vagaries and mixed messaging, leading to confusion among consumers. Microsoft has filled in many of the gaps in the ensuing months, but one big question remains: Do you really need to upgrade?

While we won't be able to judge the merits of the Xbox One X until it's out in the wild, we can provide you with a clear picture of what the system does and doesn't do, so you can begin weighing your options. You can still expect a full hardware review in a future issue, but in the meantime, here's everything we know about the Xbox One X.

by Jeff Marchiafava

Power Play

Microsoft has been lauding the Xbox One X as the world's most powerful console, and by all accounts that appears to be true. From CPU and GPU power to RAM memory bandwidth, the Xbox One has a significant advantage on both the stock PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 4 Pro, as well as Microsoft's own Xbox One S.

While crunching raw specs practically requires a degree in computer science, one stat that gamers can and should understand is floating point operations per second, or FLOPS. Simply put, FLOPS is a measurement of computer performance that provides the best general idea of how each system on the market compares.

The original Xbox One had a peak performance of 1.31 TeraFLOPS, while the Xbox One S redesign edged up to 1.40 TeraFLOPS. On the Sony side, the PlayStation 4 rates in at 1.84 TeraFLOPS, which still makes it the most powerful "base" system on the market.

That dynamic flips when it comes to the mid-gen consoles, however. The PS4 Pro vastly overshadows its predecessor with a peak performance of 4.2 TeraFLOPS, but still pales in comparison to the Xbox One X, which clocks in at a flat 6 TeraFLOPS. On paper, that amounts to the Xbox One X being roughly 40-percent more powerful than the PlayStation 4 Pro. What will that look like in the real world? There are few more aspects to consider.



The Fuss About 4K

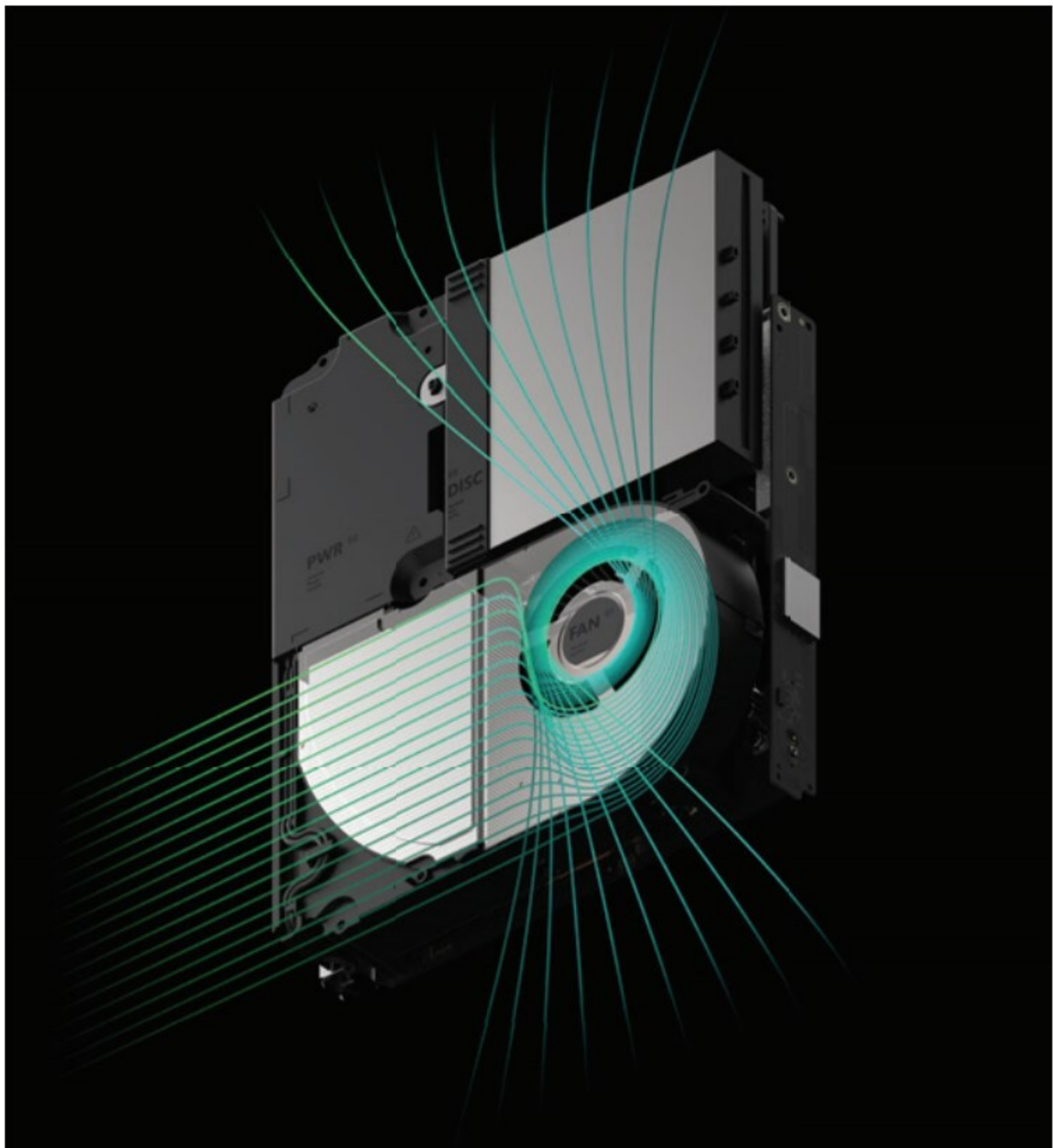
Much of the "mid-gen refresh" sales pitch has centered on 4K, which remains the bleeding edge of gaming performance. A 4K display features roughly four times the number of pixels of a 1080p display, but there are several ways a developer may choose to present a game at this resolution. As you might guess, these options all comes down to performance.

Upscaling is the most basic process, and isn't really considered "true 4K." Instead, it takes a lower resolution and blows up the image to fill in the additional pixels of a 4K display. Depending on the technique, upscaling to 4K can make a game appear sharper, but it still lacks the detail of other methods. Both the Xbox One S and PlayStation 4 Pro are capable of upscaling games to 4K.

Checkerboard Rendering is another

half-step to true 4K rendering, but yields more impressive results compared to upscaling. This technique renders half of a 4K image (in a checkerboard pattern), then uses a filter to extrapolate the missing pixels. The method is generally considered indistinguishable from true 4K by the naked eye. The majority of 4K-enabled PS4 Pro games, as well as some Xbox One X games, use checkerboard rendering – though you'd be hard-pressed to tell which ones.

Native 4K is the genuine article, outputting games at the full 3,840 x 2,160 pixels. All of Microsoft's upcoming first-party games will run in native 4K, though few third-party developers thus far have claimed that distinction for their 4K-enabled titles (leaving the door open to techniques like checkerboarding). A handful of PlayStation 4 Pro games also support native 4K.



4K Games

The following games support 4K on Xbox One X, whether natively or via upscaling or checkerboard rendering.

- ARK: Survival Evolved
- Assassin's Creed Origins
- Astroneer
- Chess Ultra
- Crackdown 3
- Dead Rising 4
- Dishonored 2
- Doom
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition
- Everspace
- Farming Simulator 17
- FIFA 18 Standard Edition
- Final Fantasy XV
- For Honor
- Forza Motorsport 7 Standard Edition
- Gears of War 4
- Ghost Recon Wildlands
- Halo Wars 2
- Injustice 2
- Killer Instinct
- Madden NFL 18
- Mantis Burn Racing
- Minecraft
- Outlast 2
- Paladins
- Portal Knights
- Resident Evil 7 Biohazard
- Rime
- Rocket League
- Titanfall 2
- Tom Clancy's The Division
- We Happy Few



Forza Motorsport 7

Xbox One X Enhanced Games

In addition to the list of 4K-enabled games on the previous page, the following titles will also offer Xbox One X-specific enhancements.

- Conan Exiles
- Diablo III: Reaper of Souls
- Dishonored: Death of the Outsider
- Dovetail Games Euro Fishing
- The Elder Scrolls Online: Morrowind
- Elite Dangerous
- F1 2017
- Fable Fortune
- Fallout 4
- Firewatch
- Forza Horizon 3
- Gears of War 4
- Halo 5: Guardians
- Halo Wars 2
- Hello Neighbor
- Hitman – The Complete First Season
- Homefront: The Revolution
- Killing Floor 2
- Life is Strange: Before the Storm
- The Long Dark
- Mafia III
- Middle-earth: Shadow of War
- Need for Speed Payback
- Path of Exile
- Pro Evolution Soccer 2018
- Project CARS 2
- Quantum Break
- Real Farm Sim
- ReCore
- Roblox
- Sea of Thieves
- Slime Rancher
- Smite
- Sniper Elite 4
- Star Wars Battlefront II
- Steep
- Superhot
- The Surge
- Tom Clancy's The Division
- Warframe
- Warhammer: End Times – Vermintide
- The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
- World of Tanks

More Than Meets The Eye

4K rendering is only one potential benefit of the Xbox One X's beefed-up hardware. Developers could also use the additional horsepower to provide better framerates, longer draw distances, shorter load times, or more complex environments. These improvements will vary on a case-by-case basis, and are up to the developer.

Titles that have been optimized for the Xbox One X in one way or another will be labeled "Xbox One X Enhanced." Microsoft has announced 72 such titles so far, including upcoming games like Assassin's Creed Origins, Middle-earth: Shadow of War, and Star Wars Battlefront II. Older titles including Ghost Recon Wildlands, Titanfall 2, and The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition will also enjoy retroactive boosts.

High Dynamic Range (aka HDR) is

another recent advancement in digital displays, which provides a greater range of colors in images. If your television supports HDR, you have plenty of options. Aside from the original Xbox One (which Microsoft has discontinued in favor of the Xbox One S), all other system models from Microsoft and Sony now support HDR.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Movies and television have been adopting the 4K format more quickly than the gaming industry, and Xbox One X will capitalize on their strides. Not only can the system stream 4K entertainment through services such as Netflix, it can also play Ultra HD 4K Blu-ray discs. In comparison, the Xbox One S also has streaming and 4K Blu-ray support, while the PlayStation 4 Pro supports streaming, but is not equipped with a 4K Blu-ray player. The original PS4 does not offer any 4K video support.



Gears of War 4

Like its predecessors, the Xbox One X still features an HDMI In port and three USB ports



One Disc To Rule Them All

While some games will carry the “Xbox One X Enhanced” label, they aren’t limited to the new console. The Xbox One, Xbox One S, and Xbox One X all use the exact same discs, so your game will be compatible with whatever system you own. Games will also identify what system they are running on and react accordingly, so if there are additional 4K assets or patches to install, only the Xbox One X will download them. That won’t take into account what display you have, however, so if you’re playing an Xbox One X on a 1080p television, you’ll still need to make hard-drive space for the 4K assets.

Storage Wars

Speaking of hard-drive space: While both Microsoft and Sony opted for 500GB hard drives for their initial current-gen systems, 1TB drives have since become the standard size for the PS4 (now sold in the slim model) and most Xbox One S bundles. The Xbox One X also features a 1TB drive, which given the extra space 4K assets will require, is likely to fill up fast. However, like previous models, the Xbox One X also supports external hard drives. In fact, Seagate is making an Xbox-branded hard drive that features a whopping 8TB of space.

Veering Into VR?

Unlike Sony, Microsoft has been reluctant to embrace VR on consoles, instead focusing its mixed-reality initiatives (which include both augmented reality like the HoloLens and

virtual reality) on Windows 10. That apparently won’t be changing anytime soon. While Xbox head Phil Spencer told *The Verge* last year that the Xbox One X was designed so VR “will be able to plug right in and work,” the company has not announced any official VR support, and omitted any mention of VR during its E3 press conference this year. So while the Xbox One X is capable of running VR games, Microsoft isn’t ready to pull the trigger. When asked for comment, a Microsoft rep told us that the company believes “right now a Windows PC is the best platform for mixed reality,” and that they have “nothing to share about mixed reality for console at this time.”

The Price Of Power

As you might have guessed, the super-sized horsepower of the Xbox One X comes with a supersized price tag as well. Microsoft’s suggested retail price for the system is \$500, which is twice what retailers are currently selling select Xbox One S bundles for. The Xbox One X’s price compares more favorably to the PlayStation 4 Pro, which currently sells for \$400, but either way, if you want the most powerful console on the market, you’ll also be paying the most. The original Xbox One also debuted at \$500, which certainly didn’t help Microsoft’s rocky current-gen launch.

The Virtues Of “Wait And See”

Most gamers have a closet that doubles as a graveyard for defunct consoles and peripherals, so you’d be forgiven if you approach the “mid-gen

refresh” with a fair amount of skepticism. The Xbox One X’s added horsepower doesn’t mean anything if developers aren’t willing to spend the extra time and effort to use it, and for most studios the lead development platform is the most popular system, not the most powerful.

Is “Xbox One X Enhanced” destined to be the next “Better With Kinect”? Probably not; unlike motion-control gimmicks and technologies that disrupt traditional gameplay (we’re looking at you, VR), 4K is the next logical and inevitable step for the gaming industry. 4K is now the standard-bearer for new televisions, and more broadcasting and streaming companies are making the transition as well. 4K gaming isn’t a matter of “if,” but “when.”

Given how rapidly technology advances, however, that “when” could be a problem for the Xbox One X. Many gamers view the purchase of a pricey new console as an investment, and the value of that investment depends on the system’s lifespan. While the original PS4 and Xbox One enjoyed healthy adoption rates, those sales were in part driven by last-gen expectations. Gamers may be more hesitant to buy Sony and Microsoft’s expensive mid-gen upgrades if they too might be rendered outdated in a few years. If that reluctance slows down adoption rates, the Xbox One X could be facing substantially cheaper and more powerful competition when 4K gaming finally starts to hit its stride. In the meantime, it will be up to Microsoft to prove that now is the time to make the transition. ♦



photo: Leah Nash

The Good Life Of Swery65

As the creator of the cult-classic horror game *Deadly Premonition*, **Hidetaka “Swery65” Suehiro** has spent years bringing the strange into living rooms across the world. We met up with Suehiro on the heels of the announcement of his new project, *The Good Life*, to discuss his career.

How did you get into games?

I actually went to college to study film-making, and I always had this dream that I wanted to create an original film. However, right upon graduation, my main professor called me in for a serious talk and we began to talk about my future career. He said that within the movie industry that it's not uncommon for it to take 20 years for you to get to the point where you're a director of your own original film and “Why don't you come work under me in the

meantime?” I was thinking to myself, “20 years of this? I'm going to switch professions and work in games.” The company that sought me out was actually SNK in Osaka, which also happened to be very close to my home, which was convenient.

Did you play a lot of games growing up?

My house was full of games. My father was actually a big gamer, so I think that had a heavy influence on me. My

mother is a big fan of *Twin Peaks*.

A lot of people look at your body of work, and the one that sticks out is *Deadly Premonition*. What is it like to have created this game that people still talk about and love all these years later?

Not dissimilar from films that you really enjoy and you can watch over and over again, I believe that *Deadly Premonition* is one of those games that you can continue to come back

to and find new things that you enjoy. That was something I was thinking of when I was directing and designing the game. It's a game that you can play for a long time. That being said, the degree of response that we've received from the game is beyond my wildest imaginations and it makes me extremely happy.

Speaking of Deadly Premonition, who owns the rights?

It's a Japanese company called Marvelous. If I ever had the desire to do a sequel to Deadly Premonition, I would have to go to Marvelous and ask for permission.

You're very active on social media. How closely do you listen to fan feedback, and have you ever been influenced by your fans?

While it's true that I'm very active on social media, I'm happy to admit that I usually don't generate ideas on the game based on things that I'm receiving from fans. In fact, I think that this would be antithetical to things that the fans are hoping for, because I like to believe they enjoy the works that I create, which means that those are coming from my brain as opposed to being recycled ideas from other folks.

That being said, I take a lot of influence from people on social media and apply those to all sorts of things. For example, my life, the way I'm thinking, and it's also allowed me to understand just how big this world is! Up until recently, I didn't realize just how many hardcore game fans there are all around the world. I love doing a Google Translate of Arabic messages that I've been getting recently and seeing what they're thinking of the games that I'm working on. That has really opened my eyes.

Have you ever learned anything about a game you've created based on the fan reaction?

The one thing I can think of is how some players of Deadly Premonition were sneaking around the world and stalking a lot of the NPC characters who are, in fact, on 24-hour cycles. They were really curious to see what kinds of things they were doing throughout the day. I thought that was fascinating because I knew it was possible, but I didn't think it was something anyone would do.

With the episodic D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die, you didn't make it all the way to the end before you departed the studio. What did you learn about episodic formats, and would you try to do an episodic game again?

In the case of D4, I lament the fact that we didn't finish the story that we wanted to tell. If I were ever given the chance to work on another episodic game, I would take the approach that Netflix does, which is to create all the episodes upfront before we release the first episode. That way, we can ensure there is a proper beginning, middle, and end to the story. When it came to the production of D4, our original intent was to create all the episodes upfront, but because of the transition of the development from 360 to Xbox One, it actually did create a lot of production issues that forced us to break up the development of the episodes.

How did the founding of White Owls give you new freedom as a developer?

White Owls hasn't been around for too long, but I can say that I do feel a high degree of freedom, and the ability to do the things I like to do. It's not just me that has a lot of freedom – it's also the staff. I really receive great pleasure in giving the staff the ability to do the things that they want to do; I make sure I hire highly skilled folks, and also to instill a sense of accountability with everyone because while freedom is great, it also comes with a lot of responsibilities. Having a staff that understands that is important, which is why I've decided to keep the staff numbers quite low, but still give them the freedom to do what they want to do as long as they execute on the things that they've promised to do.

To get more specific, White Owls is a pretty unusual type of company in Japan. White Owls supports flex-time so the staff can come in whenever they want to. Also, the break-time is not fixed, and we allow moonlighting if the staff decides they have a passion project or other things that they want to help out with outside of the core work hours. In the event that the staff is unable to execute on the projects that we're working on, ultimately it's their fault, and the project is going to go away or the company is going to go away, so everybody needs to have a strong sense of accountability and responsibility.

You recently became a Buddhist monk. How does that influence your work, or do you keep that completely separate from your career?

I try as much as I can to not have my religion or my work as a Buddhist monk directly influence my approach as a game creator. That being said, the work that I do as a Buddhist monk allows me to strike more balance in my life. During my time that I'm doing

that job, it allows me to release some stress, look at my life with a further distance, and help me when it's my time to focus all of my creative energy on game creation.

I know that you had some health issues recently. Was that the product of not having that balance that you do now as a Buddhist monk?

In order for me to overcome some of the health issues that I had, I had to stop intaking all carbohydrates and all sugar in order for me to recuperate. As I was getting better, I had some time left before I was due to return back to work, and I decided that within that time I would get a working license as a monk. In a way, my illness influenced me becoming a monk, but it was mostly because I had some time on my hands.

How does the independent game scene in Japan compare to the scenes found in the U.S. and Europe?

I believe that the number of independent developers is growing in Japan as of late, but from what I've heard, it's been difficult for some because whenever there's a design to have your game reach outside of the borders of Japan, English becomes a struggle for a lot of those developers, which requires them to seek out different publishing deals that allow them to bring their games outside of the country. That still is a pretty difficult path for a lot of developers up until now. I believe that the English language and the ability to make games that are interesting for people outside of the Japanese audience continues to be some core challenges that they're facing.

How have you taken what you learned from your past projects into your new project, The Good Life?

When I was designing Deadly Premonition, it was an open game, but a very linear path when it came to the story. We designed it so the player was motivated by going from specific story sections to the next story sections of the game. With The Good Life, however, we're breaking up the game design to allow for more freedom as they progress from different phases within the game. For example, in one part, there might be some story elements, but there are a lot of other elements that pull in the player's attention to give them the freedom to do the things that they want to do. Once they're ready to progress to the next step, we give them some more story elements, but we also mix in a lot of gameplay elements to widen the player's ability to have fun and not feel like they're on any kind of strict line when it comes to the storytelling. 💡

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1996

Suehiro receives a degree in film and video advertising at Osaka University of Arts and decides to pursue a career in video games

1996

Suehiro lands his first job at developer SNK, where he worked on The Last Blade and its sequel

2002

After stints at developers Whoopee Camp and Deep Space, Suehiro helps found developer Access Games

2003

The first game that Suehiro directs, Spy Fiction, launches

2004

Production begins on Rainy Wood, Suehiro's next game. The project is canceled in 2007

2007

Following the cancelation of Rainy Wood, Suehiro begins a new game based on that title called Deadly Premonition

2010

Deadly Premonition launches and becomes a cult hit. In 2012, it receives a Guinness World Record for "Most Critically Polarizing Survival Horror Game"

2014

In partnership with Microsoft, Suehiro releases the first episode of D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die

2016

Suehiro departs Access Games and announces that D4 will not be finished. He goes on to found a new development studio called White Owls

2017

White Owls announces its first game, called The Good Life through a crowdfunding campaign on Fig. As of this writing, it has not reached its funding goal

gear

DRESSED TO KILL

Geek fashion you would be proud to wear

by Ben Reeves

1



1 Batman Manga Souvenir Jacket

You can't throw a batarang without hitting a piece of Batman-themed clothing, but this polyester souvenir jacket stands out thanks to its Japanese design and the detailed embroidery work that features Batman and his classic manga villain Lord Death Man.

\$79.90 | hottopic.com



2

2 Star Wars The Empire Strikes Back Tie-Back Circle Skirt

Finding your perfect style is hard. Fortunately, everyone looks great in Star Wars. This blue circle skirt features an all-over print of the classic movie logo from The Empire Strikes Back and has a corset-style ribbon tie in the back.

\$49.90 | heruniverse.com

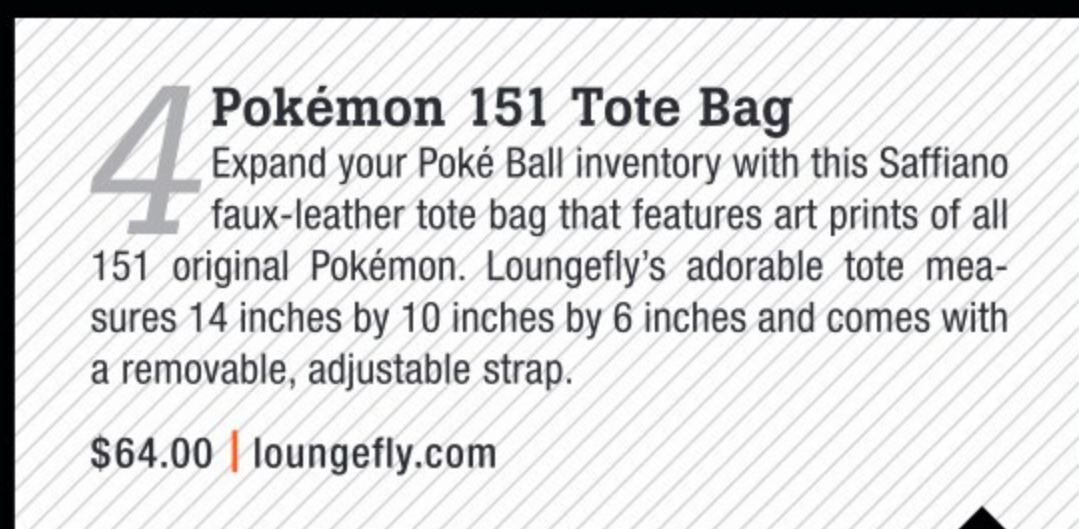


3

3 Aperture Science Tie

You don't become the powerful CEO of an experimental research facility and shower-curtain manufacturer by wearing tuxedo T-shirts. Stay classy with this officially licensed Portal 2 tie made from 100-percent silk.

\$24.99 | thinkgeek.com



4 Pokémon 151 Tote Bag

Expand your Poké Ball inventory with this Saffiano faux-leather tote bag that features art prints of all 151 original Pokémon. Loungefly's adorable tote measures 14 inches by 10 inches by 6 inches and comes with a removable, adjustable strap.

\$64.00 | loungefly.com



4



5

5 Destiny Defender Funnel Neck Jumper

The moons of Jupiter get cold at night, so stay cozy with Musterbrand's fashion-forward Destiny-themed winter wear. This heavy cotton funnel-neck jumper is designed after Destiny's Titan class and is made from a cushy cotton/polyester blend.

\$109 | us.musterbrand.com



DESTINY 2 SOUNDTRACK

Bungie's games are known for their epic, soaring anthems, and Destiny 2 is no exception. The definitive edition of the official Destiny 2 Soundtrack includes over two-and-a-half hours of powerful orchestral work.

\$9.99
bungiestore.com

TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN BY JOHN GREEN

In his first novel since the bestseller *The Fault in Our Stars*, John Green tells the story of a sixteen-year-old junior detective in pursuit of a fugitive billionaire and a \$100,000 reward.

\$19.99
johngreenbooks.com

WESTWORLD: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

Westworld is the ultimate power fantasy for the world's elite. In this unique theme park, visitors are free to indulge in every vice while exploring a pitch-perfect recreation of the Wild West. Unfortunately, behind the scenes, the park is falling apart at the seams.

\$49.99
hbo.com/westworld

The Design Failure Of The Loot Box

by Matt Miller, Senior Previews Editor

M

icrotransactions make a great game worse. The concept of small (or not so small) real-money transactions rubs a lot of people the wrong way, but increasingly, the business move is shrugged away by both creators and consumers as an inevitability of the times. The way that game publishers and developers make money is a complex issue, and I'm certainly not ready to wholesale condemn a business for trying to find a route to solvency. But with the increasing rise

in the practice, especially in triple-A games that already have a hefty price tag attached, I find myself returning to the biggest reason these money exchanges frustrate me: Building in a money-making scheme in the midst of an otherwise great game design weakens the entire experience, harms immersion, and diminishes the broader meaning and strength of in-game reward systems.

Much of the conversation around in-game microtransactions in recent months has moved toward whether something is "pay-to-win" or not, or dissolves into a defense of the unfortunate gamer with too little time who just wants a chance to keep up with his friends. I think those arguments fail an important litmus test of whether these systems make a given game experience better or worse.

Imagine going to a movie theater, watching part of a film, and then having the film paused to ask if you'd like to pay an additional three dollars to see the main characters in their coolest outfits. Would you like to shell out some cash to see Luke Skywalker level up his Jedi skills a little faster? What if Wonder Woman could add a cool new flourish to her sword attacks for the low price of a cup of coffee? For most of us, entertainment is an opportunity to escape into a world that immerses us in its wonders, and it's only when that experience is over that we step back into the real world. In-game stores break that immersion, and remind us that our fantasy only carries us to another trip into our wallets.

The more subtle, and more significant problem, is the way microtransactions subvert smart design and progression dynamics. Whether you consider it on a conscious level or not, most games are built on reward loops inherent to our psychology. The best game designers capitalize on that human desire for improvement and the benefits of success. Beat a boss? Receive a powerful new toy that excites you, but also often helps to carry you forward to subsequent victories. The desire for mastery and recompense for mastery is deeply coded into us, and games do a better job than any other entertainment medium of providing that structure.

In-game money purchases disrupt that dynamic, taking what are often some of the most desired rewards and hiding them behind a paywall. Suddenly, the illusion of merit-based improvement breaks down, and even the other in-game rewards are diminished in comparison. Perhaps the developer defends the practice, building in a way to earn those same loot boxes or drops in-game, but at a glacial pace that they would never have introduced if that was meant to be the preferred method for acquisition.

Those same spoils and improvements could instead be layered into the in-game systems. How much more exciting would the end of an Overwatch match be if there was a regular chance of a new skin for your current hero, rather than a blind box drop? What if Destiny 2 built all those tasty new ships, vehicles, and other rewards into its mission-end rewards, rather than tied to the in-game Eververse? Would the upcoming Middle-earth: Shadow of War be better or worse if the coolest and rarest weapons were fully integrated into the completion of story moments, rather than obtainable by spending a few extra dollars? I pick on these games in particular because they are such big and successful franchises with talented development teams behind them. I'd love to see the games those studios would release, unmarred by the interruption of in-game money-making schemes. I want a game's balance, pacing, and rewards to offer a pure and unadulterated vision of the developer's intent.

Game developers are under tremendous strain to be profitable, whether they're a smaller studio trying to stay afloat, or a 500-person team working for a publisher with stockholders that demand a return. But I'd encourage the hard-working people who make our favorite games to consider alternatives to disruptive in-game real-money systems, not just for their players, but also for the deep commitment they've poured into those projects. Many players might be willing to pay more upfront, but then enter a game universe in which we could leave the vicissitudes of life and money behind at the door. We like to visit a world where our rewards and improvements come from merit, and remind us of our accomplishments. Let us pay the price of admission, and then get lost in the thrill of the ride. ♦

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer





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November 2017

GAME RELEASES

Friday 03

- › Call of Duty: WWII (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 07

- › Sonic Forces (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- › Xbox One X System Launch

Friday 10

- › Need for Speed Payback (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶
- › The Sims: Cats & Dogs (PC)

Tuesday 14

- › Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Rime (Switch)

Friday 17

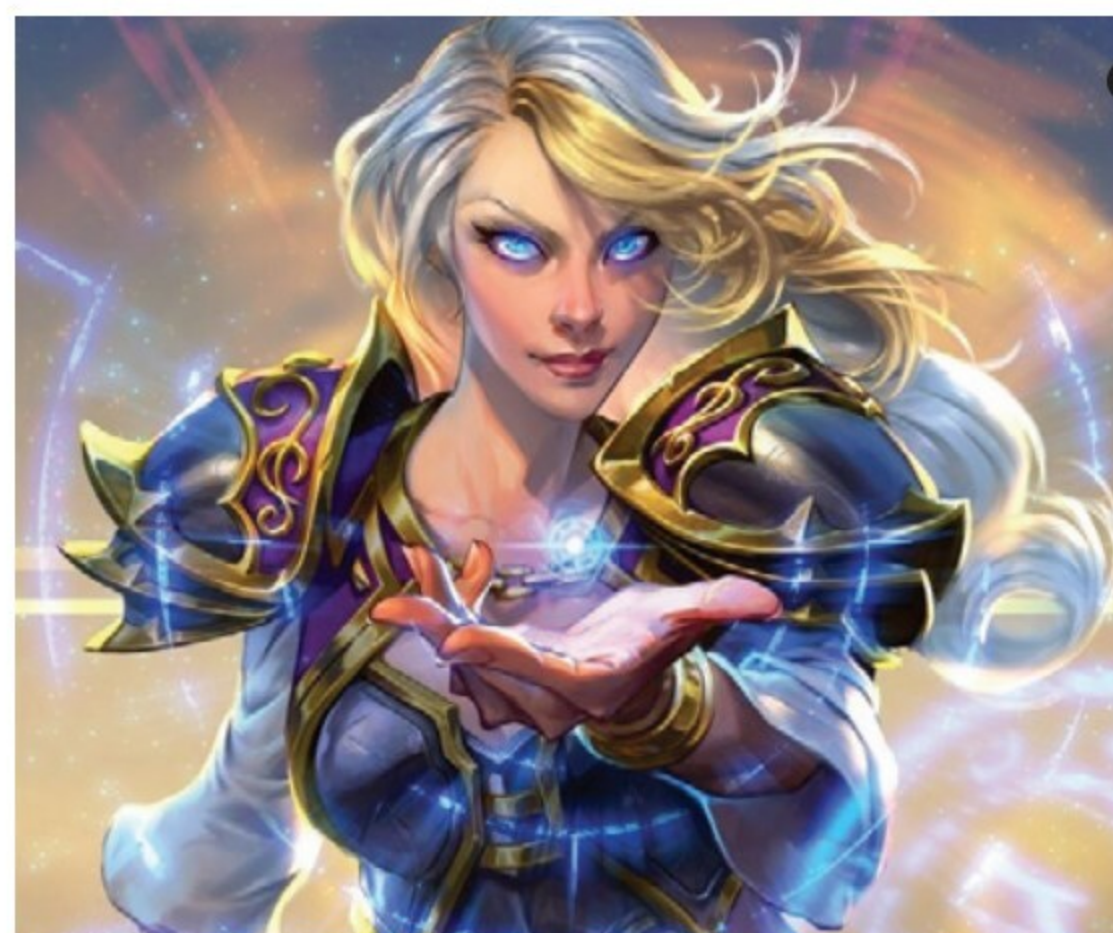
- › Pokemon Ultra Sun/Moon (3DS)
- › Star Wars Battlefront II (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Wednesday 22

- › The Inpatient (PSVR)

Tuesday 28

- › Black Mirror (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Resident Evil Revelations (Switch)



3

GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 01 Captain America Returns

After siding with the enemy and waging war against the good guys, Steve Rogers is back in the red, white, and blue, and he has a reputation to repair. You can find out how that goes in the first issue of Home of the Brave, featuring a cover by legendary painter Alex Ross.

Friday 03 BlizzCon ❸

Will we see a new Diablo announcement at this year's BlizzCon? What about new Overwatch content? Blizzard usually unloads a wealth of surprises at its annual show, and we're guessing this year will have plenty for fans to chew on. The show runs for two days in Anaheim's sprawling convention center.

Wednesday 08 Yorkshire Games Festival

Held at the National Science

and Media Museum in the United Kingdom, Yorkshire Games Festival is a five-day celebration of gaming culture and design. Along with daily Minecraft workshops, you can attend panels with key industry speakers, including Arthur Parsons of TT Games.

Wednesday 15 Skylanders Returns!

You won't find a new Skylanders video game in stores, but their quest continues in IDW's comic books. In the Spyro & Friends: Goldslinger one-shot, a band of dirt sharks attacks a soda saloon. The Skylanders are called upon to save the day.

Wednesday 22 Doomsday Clock

Watchmen's universe officially collides with DC's today in the first issue of Doomsday Clock. This 12-issue maxiseries is penned by Geoff Johns with art by Gary Frank and Brad Anderson. ❷



2

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Wednesday 01

- › Stan Against Evil (IFC)

Thursday 02

- › The Big Bang Theory (CBS)
- › S.W.A.T. (CBS)

Friday 03

- › Thor: Ragnarok (theaters)

Friday 10

- › Daddy's Home 2 (theaters)

Tuesday 14

- › Future Man (Hulu)

Friday 17

- › Justice League (theaters) ❹

Tuesday 21

- › Marvel's Runaways (Hulu)

Wednesday 22

- › Godless (Netflix)

Friday 24

- › Coco (theaters)

Wednesday 29

- › Happy! (Syfy)
- › Vikings (History Channel)

The background of the page is a vibrant, stylized illustration of Goku in his Super Saiyan form. He is shown from the chest up, facing right with a determined expression, his mouth slightly open as if shouting or exerting effort. His spiky blonde hair is prominent, and he wears his signature orange gi with a blue undershirt. The background behind him is a dynamic mix of magenta, blue, and white streaks, suggesting a high-speed battle or a powerful energy release. In the upper left corner, there is a yellow rectangular box with a black grid pattern, containing white text that lists game details. At the bottom, a thick black banner with white text spans across the page. The overall style is reminiscent of classic anime art, with bold lines and a rich color palette.

» platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» style
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(6-Player Online)

» publisher
Bandai Namco
Entertainment

» developer
Arc System Works

» release
February

YOUR WISH HAS

A dynamic illustration from a Dragon Ball Z cover. In the upper left, Frieza is shown in his white, scaly form, floating in the air with one arm raised. In the center, Cell is depicted in his green, scaly form, wearing a black gi, with a large green horn on his head. He is in a dynamic pose, reaching forward. In the lower right, Piccolo is shown in his pink, scaly form, lying on the ground with a surprised expression. A large, yellow, clenched fist is visible in the lower center. The background is a dark, rocky landscape with a bright, glowing light source on the left. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, pinks, and greens.

BY
SURIEL VAZQUEZ

BEEN GRANTED

With Dragon Ball FighterZ, Bandai Namco and Arc System Works set out to make a Dragon Ball game that's built to last



When Bandai Namco announced *Dragon Ball FighterZ* at this year's E3, it was one of the biggest surprises of the show. Not only did its gorgeous renditions of Goku, Vegeta, and other characters from Akira Toriyama's classic *Dragon Ball* manga and anime series astound, the combat looked intense and faithful to the source material. This turned the head of many *Dragon Ball* enthusiasts, and the announcement that revered fighting game studio Arc System Works was behind the wheel excited hardcore fans.

As promising as *FighterZ* might look, however, history is littered with *Dragon Ball* games of varying quality. So what makes *Dragon Ball FighterZ* different? Bandai Namco hopes to make this the first *Dragon Ball* fighting game with the systemic depth to keep fans playing for years, and is going back to the genre's traditional 2D gameplay to do so. To learn more about how Bandai Namco and Arc System Works are teaming up to make this happen, we visited both studios in Japan. Our deep dive into *FighterZ* reinforced our preconception that it could be the best and most reverent *Dragon Ball* game yet.

WHATZ IN A NAME?

With characters like Vegeta, Majin Buu, and Mr. Satan, Dragon Ball is no stranger to weird names, and FighterZ is a similarly strange moniker. Dragon Ball FighterZ was a codename initially, which Bandai Namco planned to replace with something snappier. The team had several suggestions from parts of the various Bandai Namco offices across the world; some suggested the name Dragon Ball Rising, while others wanted something with Butōden in the title, a name which harkens back to the history of Dragon Ball fighting games. In the end, however, the team felt Dragon Ball FighterZ conveyed everything a fan might want to know about the game, giving it a broad appeal.

As for the uppercase Z at the end of the title: The letter is deeply intertwined with the history of the series around the world, and for it not to be part of the name (and be a capital letter) would feel out of place. They also added it because “Z,” being the last letter in the alphabet, expresses a sense of the game being the end-all, greatest game there ever is,” Bandai Namco producer Tomoko Hiroki says. The title is pronounced “Dragon Ball Fighters,” despite the temptation to say “Dragon Ball Fighter Z.”

POWERING UP

In outlining its plans for Dragon Ball FighterZ, Bandai Namco points to a recent Dragon Ball success story: Dragon Ball Xenoverse. The bestselling Dragon Ball game to date, it provided the company with a number of revelations. For one, it showed fans love the story and world Dragon Ball creator Akira Toriyama has built as much as they do the incredible fights that take place within it, and are willing to stick with a game that lets them explore that world over a long period of time.

Second, it showed fans are receptive to games that dare to stray from the established story arcs of the manga and TV series previous games have retold for years. Taking both of those lessons to heart, Bandai Namco sought to create a Dragon Ball game that not only gave fans a new story to dissect, but would let them stick around long-term. “There’s a perception that a short-term game or a game that has ended is a boring game,” says producer Masayuki Hirano. The team

at Bandai Namco doesn’t want to make a boring game. They want to interact with fans and cater to them, facilitating conversations that will hopefully lead to better games and loyal fans. To do this, they decided to once again create a fighting game.

Bandai Namco is no stranger to competitive games. As the publisher of Tekken, Soul Calibur, the *Naruto* fighting games, and Gundam Versus, it’s been communicating with dedicated fans of multiplayer games for years. With its next Dragon Ball game, Bandai Namco is hoping to tap into that fanbase and produce a game that could not only introduce Dragon Ball fans to the magic of the fighting genre (and vice-versa), but also has the longevity to keep them playing for years. With the scope limited to two combatants a battlefield, it could also wow players with the next generation of Dragon Ball graphics.

Enter Arc System Works (often shortened to “ArcSys”), a veteran fighting game

developer who fit Bandai Namco’s needs to the letter. ArcSys has a history of creating some of the deepest fighting games in the genre, pushing the envelope from both a gameplay and visual perspective. ArcSys had recently garnered widespread acclaim for both the visual and mechanical design of Guilty Gear Xrd, which used the Unreal Engine 3 to render characters that looked indistinguishable from high-quality anime, as well as offer players a deep well of systems to immerse themselves in. ArcSys also has a history with Dragon Ball games.

With a strong desire to create a game Dragon Ball fans would love for years and the right developer to build it, Bandai Namco began putting Dragon Ball FighterZ together. “The aim of this game is to bridge the gap between the casual and the hardcore,” says ArcSys head and Dragon Ball FighterZ director Junya Motomura. With that in mind, the studio began work on a game both Dragon Ball and fighting game fans could love.



THE LONG HISTORY OF ARC

Bandai Namco chose the perfect studio to lead the charge on a game that appeals to both fighting game and Dragon Ball fans alike. Originally a developer of arcade-style computer games, licensed products, and console ports for games like *Battletoads*, *Rolling Thunder*, and *Double Dragon* (a series it would later own), ArcSys broke new ground when it released its debut original fighting game, *Guilty Gear*, in 1998 for the PlayStation.

The goal of the series at the time, according to Motomura, was to move away from the slew of martial arts-themed fighting games that were on shelves in favor of something more fantastical. Inspired by the over-the-top moves and characters of anime (including *Dragon Ball*), the game included characters with more intricate visual designs than most of its contemporaries, as well as super moves that could instantly kill an opponent.

ArcSys wasn't content to sit on its laurels, however. After iterating on *Guilty Gear* with *Guilty Gear X* and *XX*, ArcSys went in a completely different direction for *Guilty Gear 2: Overture*, turning the game into a 3D action game (similar to *Devil May Cry*) with troop management. The team faced complicated licensing issues in 2003, when Sega retained the license to *Guilty Gear* after merging with series-publisher Sammy. Rather than try to acquire them back, ArcSys opted to create a new franchise under the direction of Toshimichi Mori. *Blazblue* played similarly to *Guilty Gear*, but had a much more involved plot, which was notable during a time when most fighters had flimsy or non-existent narratives. Shifting gears a few years later, it developed *Persona 4 Arena* for publisher Atlus, which was again lauded for its highly diverse roster, deep fighting system, and lengthy story mode.

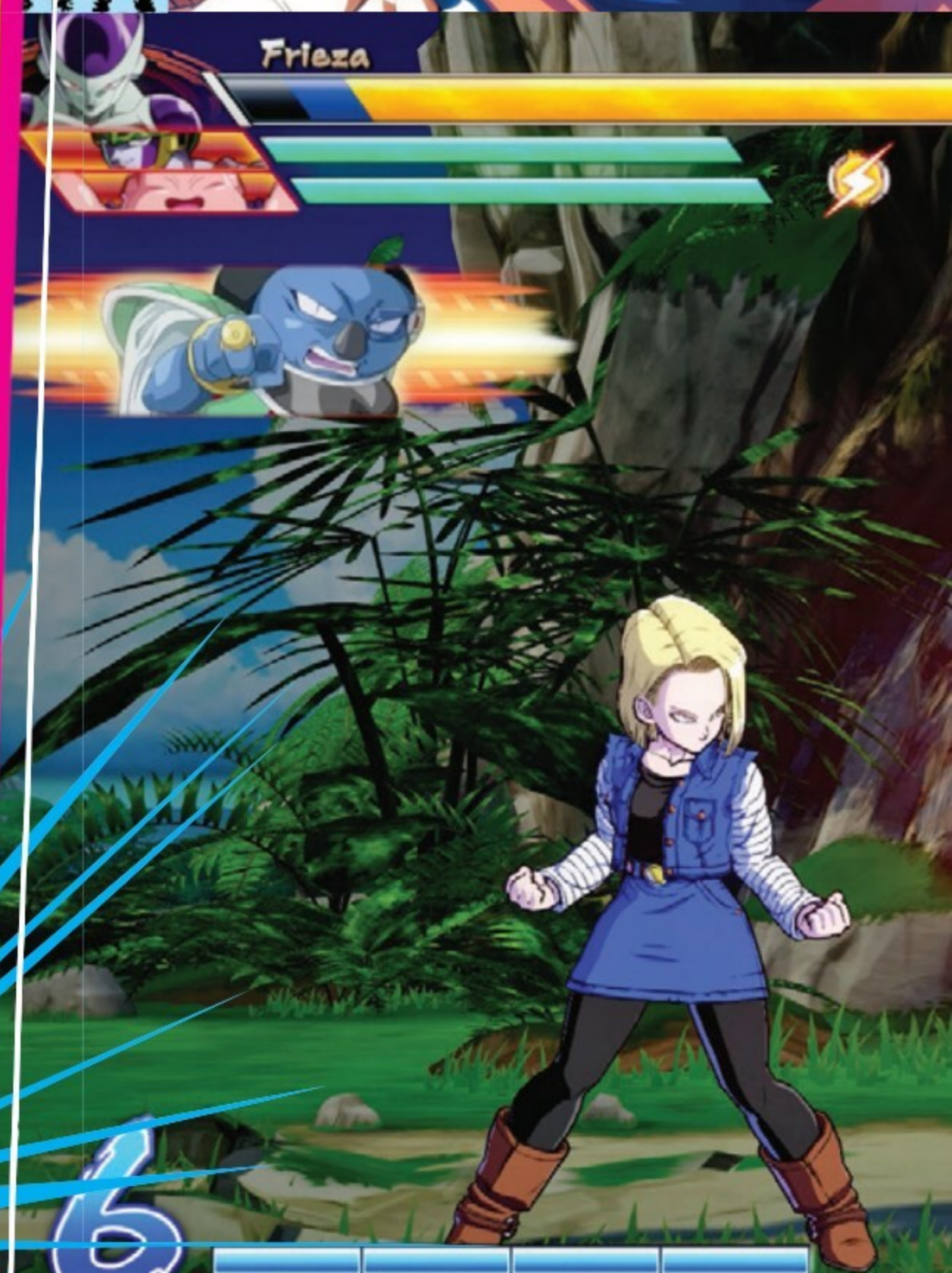
When it came to reviving *Guilty Gear* after ArcSys later gained back the rights, it developed a new art style for *Guilty Gear Xrd* using the Unreal Engine 3 that eschewed traditional 3D modeling techniques in favor of a style in which every frame of animation is handcrafted and manipulated to resemble a 2D fighter. The move was universally lauded, and as mainstream press outlets praised the fidelity of *Xrd*'s visuals and improved learning curve, hardcore fans were ecstatic by the triumphant return of their favorite fighting series, which is still seen as one of the most deep and rewarding to date.

The company is also intimately familiar with *Dragon Ball*, having worked on three other fighting games in the series before *FighterZ*. In 2004 it released *Dragon Ball Z: Supersonic Warriors* for the Game Boy Advance, and followed it up with *Supersonic Warriors 2* the next year. In 2015, it released *Dragon Ball Z: Extreme Butōden* for the 3DS, a new entry in the popular Super Famicom fighting series.

Although the company has developed a few games outside their fighting wheelhouse (such as *Hard Corps: Uprising* and *Double Dragon IV*), ArcSys games are typically difficult and tough to master. This falls in line with the studio's mantra: improvement. The studio sees giving the player a challenge like the ones it tackles with every project as a vital part of its identity. "The work you put in [with fighting games] is one of the biggest rewards," Motomura says. Although *FighterZ* will be more accessible to the average player, ArcSys hopes players will find the same rewarding challenge to improve as players have been able to uncover in its other fighting games.



Goku (and Vegeta)'s blue-haired forms vary from their regular Super Saiyan counterparts





CREATING A HYPERBOLIC TIMESINK

Despite fighting games' recent resurgence and increasing popularity, they continue to be a niche genre. They emphasize learning, memorization, and a competitive drive to improve, which can turn some players off. What's more, you can often tell a poor player from a good one easily, since it's harder to hide a lack of skill when there's no team to blame, and your presence in a match is front-and-center at all times. With that in mind, Motomura and his team were determined to make a game any Dragon Ball fan could play.

Although most recent Dragon Ball games

have taken place in 3D worlds, Bandai Namco chose a 2D perspective for FighterZ for a number of reasons. First, 2D games are easier to visually digest. Although the action can get hectic (especially with the kinds of screen-filling, colorful attacks Dragon Ball is known for), players can usually tell everything that's going on in a match at a glance: Who has how much health, where their opponent is at any given time, and what resources and options are available to them. The controls are also a bit easier to digest when players don't have to worry about 3D movement. "It's much better for the competitive environment

too," Motomura says. "Because it offers tighter controls, and proper impact since they're on a 2D plane where the characters won't really miss each other."

Fans had also been asking for a new, pure Dragon Ball fighting game for years, and while popular, the 3D fighting games Bandai Namco had been making until recently weren't scratching that itch. "When you look at ArcSys' games, such as Guilty Gear and Blazblue, you can tell that 3D fighting games aren't evolved forms of 2D fighting games," says Bandai Namco producer Tomoko Hiroki. Knowing that what fans wanted was also where ArcSys' strength lied, Bandai Namco decided to stick to a 2D perspective.

However, ArcSys knew it had to make the game more appealing to fans who may not have played a fighting game before. To help ease players in, it simplified many aspects of fighting games while heightening others. For starters, every character in FighterZ uses a much smaller range of commands than in other fighting games. Additionally, every character uses the same motions to pull off their special moves, and they use only the classic quarter-circle forward (or backward) motion used to fire off a hadouken in Street Fighter – no half or full-circle, uppercut, or charge motions are required.





Players can also pull off short (albeit weakened) combos simply by mashing buttons, which helps players capitalize on their opponent's mistakes without having to go into training mode to memorize specific combos. This helps players focus on learning the strategy of their character instead of their muscle memory. "By making it easy to introduce newcomers, the game slowly transforms them into core fans," Motomura says.

This also means there's less need for the kinds of long-winded tutorials many fighting games have. Though ArcSys is known for some of the most in-depth fighting game tutorials in the genre, this is often because its games require them. Because FighterZ won't have as many specific and specialized techniques as Guilty Gear or BlazBlue, it hopes to make the learning process briefer and integrate it into the story mode.

ArcSys also decided to amp up the intensity of many fighting game concepts to bring them in line with the Dragon Ball universe. In most fighting games, for example, throws are a way to punish defensive opponents. In FighterZ, however, not only is a throw followed by a flurry of blows, it also lets players start a combo, making throws a more exciting part of the game. Players can also press a single button to fire off a series of rapid energy attacks the way Dragon Ball characters tend to dish them out with abandon. It also helps that Dragon Ball is known for its bevy of screen-filling lasers, explosions, and lightning-quick punches, which should help make each match more exciting.

For the hardcore crowd, ArcSys has built in a number of systems that offer players a ton of avenues to express their skill and creativity. FighterZ implements some of the movement options found in Guilty Gear (such

as air dashes and jump cancels), and every character can sacrifice one "ki" meter (which can also be used to fire off special Ultimate or Ultimate Z moves), to teleport behind their opponent. More knowledgeable opponents can also deflect their opponent's ki blasts easily, meaning they aren't a strong option to use repeatedly.

Finally, the team-based nature of FighterZ offers another outlet for creativity. Players have to decide which three characters they'll

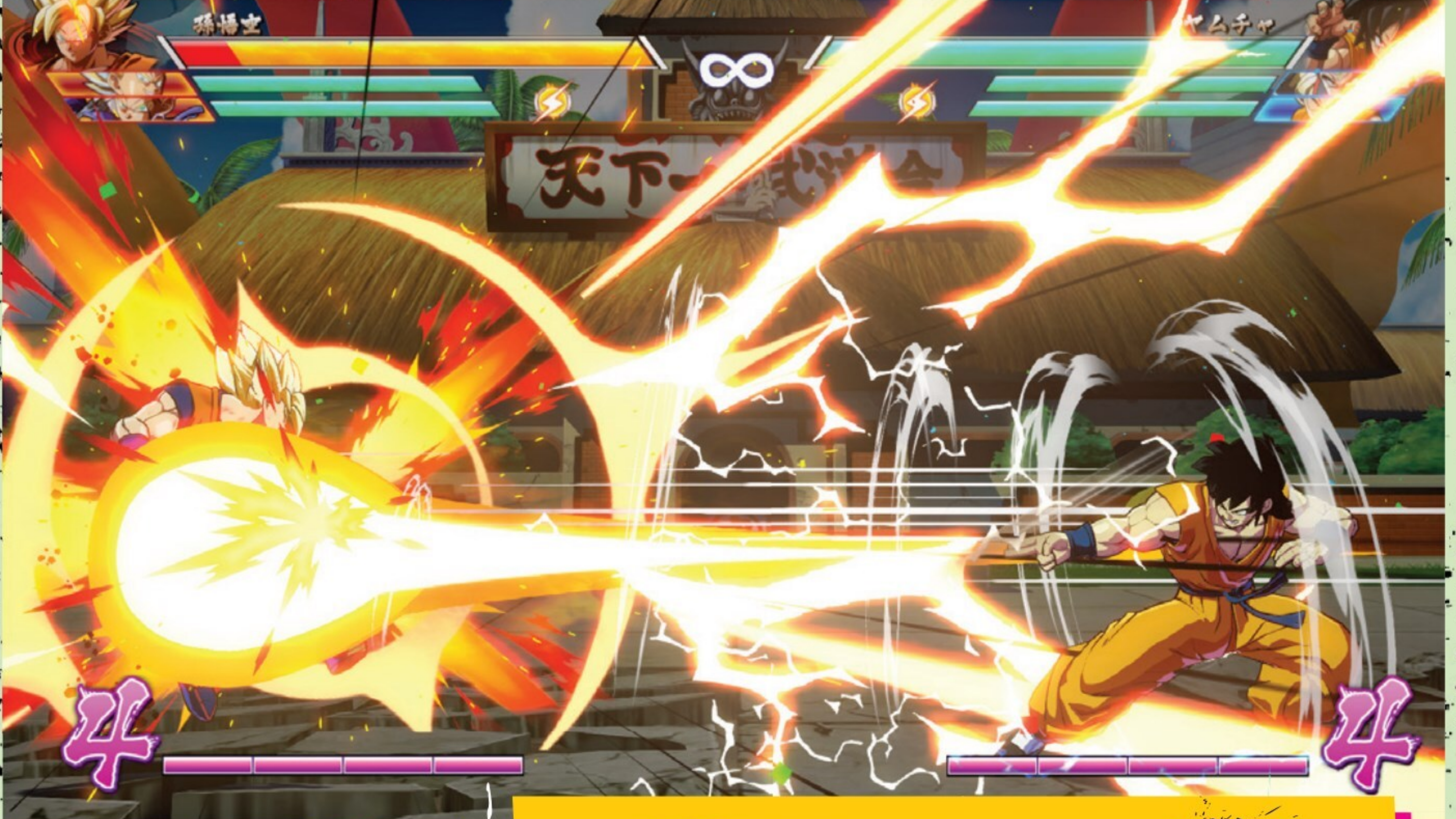
stick with, how that team is arranged, and how to best use the ability to call in characters for assist attacks or tag them in mid-combo. Most characters also have special moves with a variety of options and follow-ups, and players can string these together to air combos, wall bounces, and other techniques to put together intricate combos. Using all of these options in the heat of the moment could provide the challenge high-level players are looking for.

Tien's Tri-Beam Cannon deals damage to both the opponent and himself





Yamcha's appearance takes its cues from early *Dragon Ball Z* sagas



TAKING THE FIGHT ONLINE

While *FighterZ* features a number of standard online modes, the way they're structured and presented is a bit different. Taking a cue from *Guilty Gear Xrd*'s online lobby system, where players could dress up diminutive avatars, walk around dioramas of the *Guilty Gear* world, and find matches by walking up to arcade machines, *FighterZ*'s online system takes place entirely through avatar-based lobbies, giving players an incentive to represent their favorite characters and tweak their characters' color palettes online.

The replay system also curates the best matches for players to watch by letting players stamp their reactions to matches. Matches with a lot of positive reactions surface to the top and are seen by more players, making it easier for new players to learn from instructive or exciting matches.

And while other team-based fighting games have attempted to have online team battles, *FighterZ*'s Party Match, where three players for a single team take on three other players online, could make for the most frantic team battles yet. Playing with two other people during the same match means everyone has to watch for whenever the active player tags them in to fire off a super or finish a combo. "We're also planning to implement an interface that lets the players communicate in a simple manner, such as 'I'm ready to go, call me,' or like, 'I'll have to attack someone else,'" Motomura says.

Because of the higher player count, disconnects may be a more common problem, but the team decided that, rather than have a lopsided matchup, it'd be best if the match ended prematurely if one member drops out.



THE DRAGON IS IN THE DETAILS

As fighting games become an increasingly crowded genre, standing out among the pack takes more than finely tuned combat. In the age of social media, minor nuances, whether they're aesthetic, mechanical, or a bit of both, can propagate among fans and non-fans alike, increasing awareness and excitement for a game. With a plethora of manga, anime, films, and more to draw these little touches and references from, it should be no surprise that Dragon Ball FighterZ is chock-full of them.

Speaking with both Bandai Namco and ArcSys, it's clear FighterZ is built by people with more than a passing or recent love for the series. Everyone we spoke to had a story of what Dragon Ball meant to them; most either watched the anime or read the manga growing up, and several of their friends drew themselves in the style of the manga or anime. Motomura, for example, cites *Dragon Ball* as one of the reasons he loves anime, which is what prompted him to join ArcSys in

the first place. Bandai Namco Producer Ryo Mito was an avid fan of one the first Dragon Ball fighting games, *Dragon Ball Z: Super Butōden* on the NES. With a bit of a laugh, Hiroki counts Goku as her first childhood crush. (You can read more about the team's history with Dragon Ball on page 46).

This collective adoration for Dragon Ball has made for a game where nearly every attack, special, and super move is a callback. Fans have matched the camera angles of various moves with single panels or stills from the manga or anime. If Krillin and Android 18 are on the same team, the cutscene for Android 18's Ultimate Z move changes to acknowledge their relationship. Gohan's Ultimate Z move has him firing off the father-son Kamehameha which ultimately obliterates Cell.

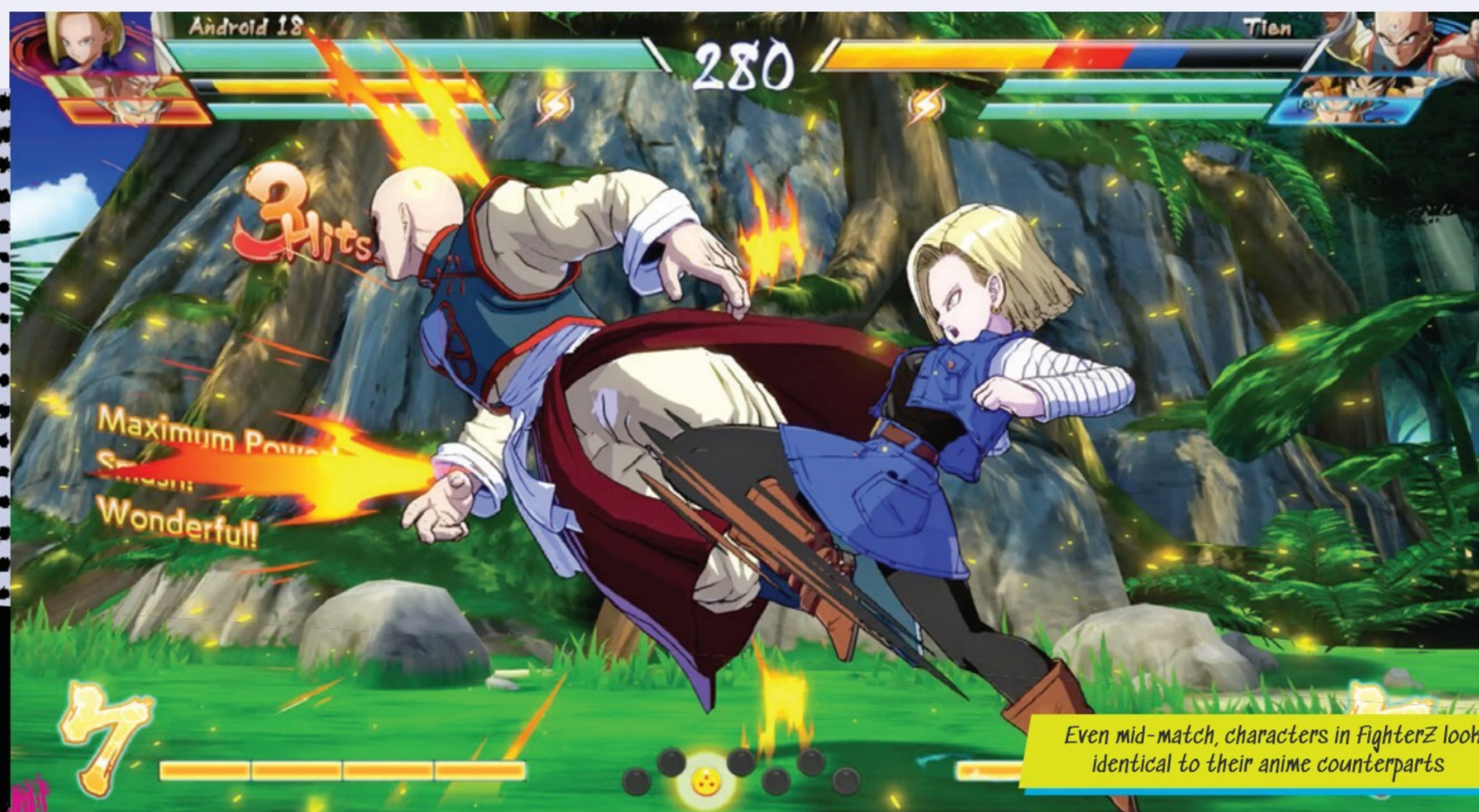
Lining up all these references requires an enormous amount of research, and while there's no dedicated historian on staff, several people at ArcSys dove into the sea of Dragon Ball material for potential reference

and gameplay ideas to see what might work in FighterZ. Battle Planner Seiji Fukumoto ultimately decides which moves make the cut, or expands on ideas that don't currently work but could.

Usually, finding the right way to portray a character or reference to a specific moment is a matter of curation. Goku, for example, has so much material to work with that it was hard to condense it all into a single character's moveset. This is part of why Super Saiyan God Super Saiyan [SSGSS] Goku, whose moveset takes most of its inspiration for the current Dragon Ball series *Dragon Ball Super*, is also on the roster.

Many references even have gameplay ramifications; Frieza's Ultimate Z turns him into Golden Frieza, but only for a limited time (which is itself a reference). After it expires, he's left in a vulnerable state. However, if the player has at least one meter of ki left, they can call in Frieza's lackey, Sorbet, to fire off a surprise off-screen laser by pressing a button at the right time. Additionally, his Death Saucer special ability produces devastating projectile blades that boomerang their way back to him and can actually harm Frieza on the return trip. These sorts of gameplay homages are everywhere, and demonstrate the game is made by fans who are willing to put in the effort to make crazy ideas work.

A few key ideas didn't work from a gameplay perspective, however. Several major fights in Dragon Ball come down to two opponents firing off immense blasts of ki at each other. These face-offs build suspense as one side begins to overtake the other, only for some twist to lead to a reversal of fortune. Though other Dragon Ball games have included these faceoffs, ArcSys opted against it. "It's brute forces hitting each other," Motomura. "That makes it hard to put



Even mid-match, characters in FighterZ look identical to their anime counterparts

into a fighting game because simply mashing buttons isn't a very good representation of brute force, or something players can get good at."

Another major element the team ultimately abandoned was the tendency for fights to take to the sky. Most characters in *Dragon Ball* can simply lift themselves off the ground and fly, and while this is represented to some degree with Ultimate attacks and longer

combos that launch an opponent into the air, ArcSys is keeping characters grounded most of the time. This is because while an early build of the game included more air-focused combat, it wasn't much fun to play, according to Motomura. "If you can stay in the air, you basically stay there for a long time," he says. "This makes the game less dynamic in comparison to being on the ground where you can perform varying moves." Finding

the right distance from which to attack your opponent was more difficult, and designing moves around a more freeform fighting system proved cumbersome.

What has made it through development, however, should be more than enough to get *Dragon Ball* fans excited. Twitter is filled with fans and players calling out specific homages and references in *FighterZ*, and it has become one of the major selling points for the game.

THE FINALISTS ARE CHOSEN

In addition to several previously revealed characters, we got the world's first hands-on with four of the most recently announced combatants, all of which have their own style of fighting. Read on to learn more about the two strongest Saiyans of Universe 7 and two world-class martial artists.



SUPER SAIYAN GOD SUPER SAIYAN GOKU

Although Goku's strongest form yet might not look too different from his blonde counterpart, he'll play far differently on the battlefield. His gameplan is more aggressive, as his goal is to close the distance as quickly as possible and break the opponent's guard to deal devastating damage. To help him do this, he has a long-range dive kick, as well as a secondary teleport move that hits close to the opponent.

Once he's up close, the one-inch punch he threw against Frieza in *Resurrection 'F'* works as a command grab the opponent can't block. His Kamehameha Ultimate also teleports him above and in front of the opponent, making it good for potentially catching the opponent off-guard. Finally, as a Super Saiyan God, he can burn an additional two ki meters during his Ultimate Z to deal that extra bit of damage that could lead to a downed opponent.



SUPER SAIYAN GOD SUPER SAIYAN VEGETA

As with Goku's SSGSS form, Vegeta's blue-haired incarnation trades defense for aggression. The difference between the two is while Goku has several ways to get close to his opponent, Vegeta has more options at his disposal once he's closed the gap. His dash kick move will be a vital part of his gameplan according to ArcSys, and will work as his most consistent way to start combos.

Once he's in, he has several moves that can break an opponent's guard, leading to devastating combos. The God version of his Big Bang Attack has a few more uses, too, as it's no longer an Ultimate move. And, as with Goku, SSGSS Vegeta can burn an additional two ki meters during his Ultimate Z to have it deal even more damage than usual.



YAMCHA

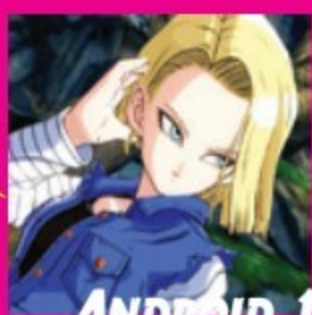
Taking a visual cue from his early *Dragon Ball Z* appearance, Yamcha is a rushdown character who specializes in creating mixup after mixup. His Wolf Fang Fist special move can end in a few different ways depending on which button you use to input it, and each ends with the opponent in a different location. The same is true for his highly maneuverable Spirit Ball Ultimate; not only can you change the angle of the ball's approach, but also which way it launches the opponent should the move hit. With this versatility, ArcSys recommends Yamcha as a character newcomers can use to learn the intricacies of *FighterZ*.



TIEN SHINHAN

Although Tien is sporting his duds from *Dragon Ball Super*, his moveset will include references to nearly every era of the character. His Super Knee Uppercut dive kick makes a callback to his presence at one of the early Tenkaichi tournaments from the original *Dragon Ball*, as is his ability to call Chiaotzu to hold his opponent still for a second. He also has a special move that launches the opponent into the air, a three-step combo, and a couple of high and low-hitting special moves to keep the opponent guessing. Using all of these options effectively will take some work, and ArcSys recommends the character for veterans of fighting games.

His most famous move, the Tri-Beam, has a few variations. Its Ultimate version deals more damage than most supers, but also uses up Tien's life energy, draining his health. Its Ultimate Z version has a wider spread, deals more damage, and can be used multiple times in a row, dealing additional damage to both Tien and his opponent.



ANDROID 18

THE REST OF THE CAST INCLUDES:

- Android 16
- Android 18
- Majin Buu
- Frieza
- Goku
- Krillin
- Perfect Cell
- Piccolo
- Teen Gohan
- Trunks
- Vegeta

A BATTLE OF GODS (AND HUMANS)

Choosing the right characters for a game like FighterZ was difficult. Though mainstays like Goku, Vegeta, and Piccolo are a given, the world of Dragon Ball is filled with potential fighting game characters. When choosing the roster for FighterZ, Bandai Namco and ArcSys worked together to find characters who were popular among fans, but would also let the team explore interesting game-play concepts. "As a rule of thumb, we made sure not to include common characters that would probably make people angry, questioning why that particular character is in the game," says Hiroki.

The team also has to keep in mind the issue of character balance. If one fighter or strategy clearly outstrips its competition or counters, it can effectively cut down the number of viable options at play. In FighterZ, the goal of making sure every character and playstyle can compete clashes with Bandai Namco's desire to keep the game true to Dragon Ball. If Krillin could take on Goku in his strongest form and win, for example, it wouldn't fit with the lore of the series. "Of course, being too true would mean there's a disadvantage in battle," says Motomura. "So we approached the game system so that there's a level of fairness regardless of what character is

You can fight on the destroyed remains of West City

chosen by using the license settings to balance out the playing field."

This is a large part of why FighterZ is a team-oriented game. When players can build a team of three combatants, it makes more sense to include characters of disparate strengths. It's easier to believe, for example, that Vegeta, Krillin, and Majin Buu can take on and defeat Goku, Cell, and Yamcha than it is to think Krillin alone could defeat Goku.

This also lets the team-building aspect affect balance. While Krillin may not be a strong fighter on his own, his call-in assist attack has him heal his allies with Senzu Beans, which may make him stronger on the sidelines than on point. Having characters work as part of a team also fits into Dragon Ball's larger theme of cooperation being stronger than any one fighter.

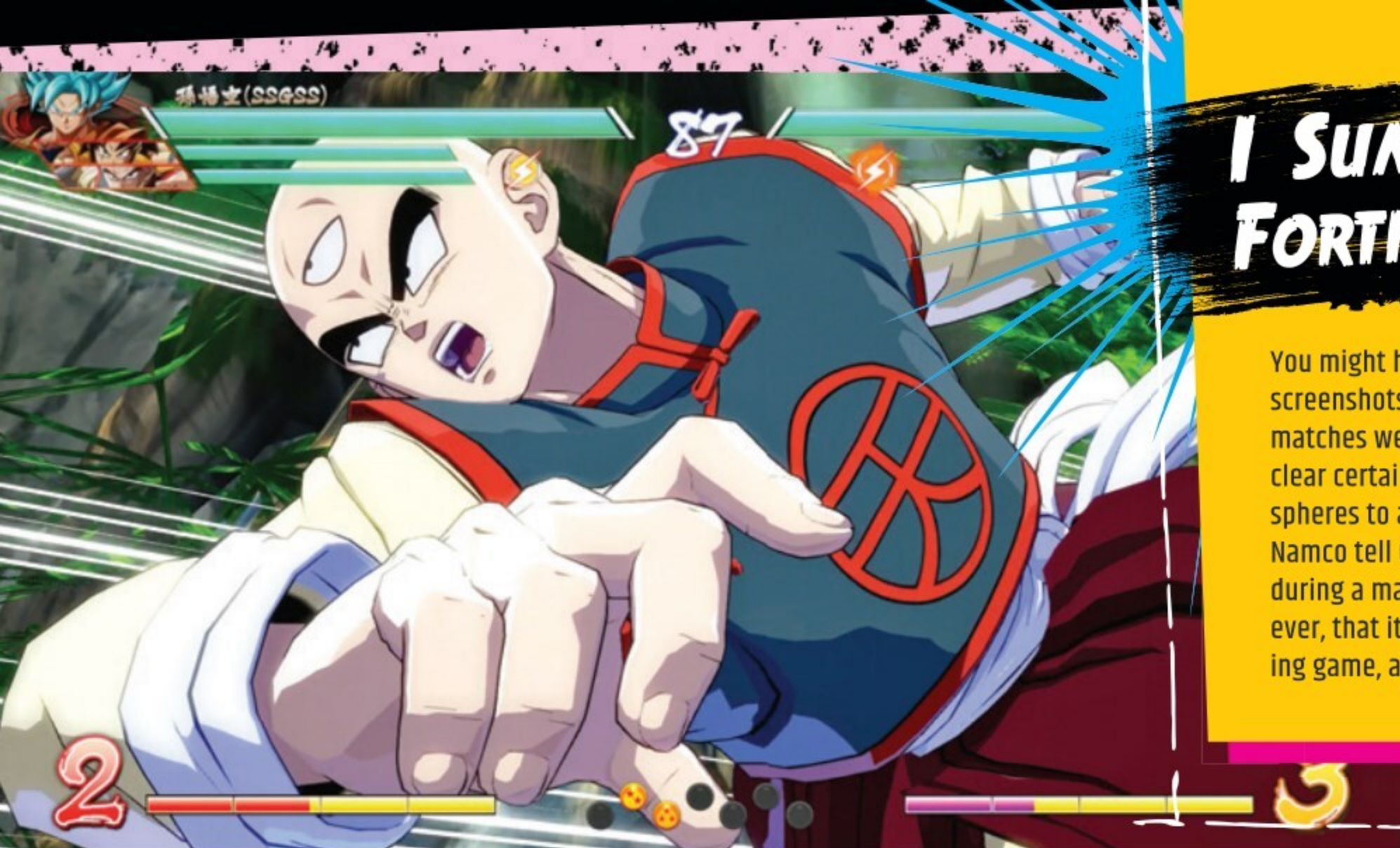
RETURN OF THE ANDROIDS

No modern fighting game is complete without a story mode, and ArcSys games are no exception. This studio's games have some of the most elaborate tales to tell in the genre, so it should be no surprise that FighterZ will have a substantial story mode. It should also offer a few surprises for fans of Dragon Ball and ArcSys games alike. "The experience we gained from the Dragon Ball Xenoverse series taught us that players like

A NEW ANDROID ARISES

Android 21 has a big role in the story mode of FighterZ, which centers around the Androids' return. A recent teaser for the game showed her for the first time standing back-to-back with Android 16, which could hint at some sort of connection between the two. "And because she herself is a scientist of the Red Ribbon Army, you can guess that she also has a connection with the other Androids," says Bandai Namco producer Tomoko Hiroki. The team has confirmed she's as smart (if not more so) than Dr. Gero, the original creator of the Androids.

Though characters like Bulma, Videl, and Chi-Chi are beloved among fans, Dragon Ball offers few prominent female villains or characters who can mix it up with people as strong as Goku (Android 18 being one of the few exceptions). To help offset this balance, Toriyama, Bandai Namco, and ArcSys decided to create a new female villain who could compete with the series' strongest fighters.



I SUMMON YOU FORTH, SHENRON!

You might have noticed a little teaser tucked away among the screenshots in this article: The titular Dragon Balls. During the matches we played in the most recent build of the game, it became clear certain actions were prompting the magical wish-granting spheres to appear on the bottom of the screen. ArcSys and Bandai Namco tell us something will happen should you collect all seven during a match, but they wouldn't say what. Hiroki did tease, however, that it "represents a system that isn't found in any other fighting game, and is a brand new feature to the Dragon Ball series."

new stories set in the Dragon Ball universe," Hiroki says. Because of this, ArcSys decided to challenge themselves by telling an entirely original story.

This new tale revolves around the return of the Androids, who nearly rendered the Earth an apocalyptic wasteland the first time they appeared. A recent teaser trailer also showed an army of clones of the Z Warriors destroying West City. How these are connected, we're not yet sure. We also know that characters from the various sagas, including Frieza, Cell, and Majin Buu, also make appearances. But where do these cameos place the story in the series timeline? "We can tell you that the timeline of the story takes place after the story of *Dragon Ball Z*," says Hiroki. She also teased that upcoming character announcements will continue to hint at the plot, and fans should attempt to piece together the story based on the roster.

The mode also includes a new, mysterious character named Android 21 designed by Dragon Ball creator Akira Toriyama. Her full history and role is still unclear, but we know she will be important.

ArcSys' past ventures into fighting game story modes have been more story than fighting. *BlazBlue*'s story mode was a deep well of lore without that many battles; *Persona 4 Arena* placed hundreds of lines of text and dialogue between matches that went by too quickly; *Guilty Gear Xrd*'s story mode, as well those of its updates, had no fighting in them whatsoever. While this approach to single-player modes allows ArcSys to write scenes where characters simply talk instead of trying to contrive a reason to fight, it also meant the pacing wasn't in line with what fighting game fans expected. For *FighterZ*, Motomura promises players will take part in fights more often.

Motomura also aims to throw a new twist into the formula. The setup for most fighting game story modes has players jumping between cutscenes and fights, with little else in the way of interactivity. While Motomura was coy with details, he did mention the *FighterZ* story mode will be more than that. "In this mode, you will have more involvement," he told us. Players will have the opportunity to affect the course of the plot to some degree, though how that works or what kinds of events players will have control over is still a mystery.

A NEW ADVENTURE AWAITS

Fans have been clamoring for a Dragon Ball fighting game that's worth taking seriously, and *FighterZ* has left players with high expectations. Since its announcement, fans have been hungry for new details about the game, and even players with no affinity for the source material are taking notice of how immaculately detailed every character looks and how explosively every match plays out.

Bandai Namco is blown away by the reaction to *FighterZ*, and are using fan expectation as a motivator. "All the positive feedback we received has given the much needed uplift to keep development chugging along," says Mito. Between a lovingly detailed art style, a smorgasbord of references that infuse story into its team-based gameplay, and a story mode that will hopefully break new ground for the series, it has a lot going for it.

The teams at Bandai Namco and ArcSys, themselves made of fans with a deep connection to one of the greatest and most popular anime series of all time, hope *FighterZ* is the game that lets diehards remember why they love Dragon Ball while also fostering a new generation of fans. If what we've played and seen is indicative of the final product, it just might. ♦

For more, check out gameinformer.com/DBZ. We have the first gameplay footage of SSGSS Goku and Vegeta, Tien, and Yamcha. We also have interviews with the teams at Bandai Namco and Arc System Works





THE HISTORY OF DRAGON BALL VIDEO GAMES

How one of Japan's most popular entertainment franchises found its footing in America

BY
KYLE HILLIARD

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Dragon Ball ranks among Japan's most successful entertainment franchises of all time. The original manga (which is bested only by *One Piece* as the best-selling manga of all time) has inspired 4 different anime series, 19 films, and more than 50 games since it began in 1984. Dragon Ball's influence is noticeable all over anime and video games, but it is also present touring the country itself. While visiting Japan for our Dragon Ball FighterZ cover story trip, we saw Dragon Ball merchandise everywhere we went, from the geek culture hub of Akihabara to more obscure places like the gift shop of a museum devoted to the history of ramen. The pervasiveness of Dragon Ball is impressive considering the franchise debuted more than 30 years ago.

Dragon Ball's success in North America took a lot more time to nurture. It didn't find wide popularity until after the anime had already stopped airing in Japan. The first episodes of the original Dragon Ball saga did not appear on American television until 1995. It had some moderate success, but it wasn't until *Dragon Ball Z* aired on Cartoon Network that the show found a wider audience.

Once it became popular stateside, Dragon Ball creator Akira Toriyama and book publisher Shueisha pushed hard to bring myriad games based on the license to the west. To date, more than 40 Dragon Ball games have released in North America. The first *Xenoverse* alone has sold more than 5 million copies.

Video games are as important a part of the Dragon Ball franchise as its manga and anime counterparts. They serve as an entry point for new fans and an opportunity for old fans to play in the beloved universe. We spoke with Bandai Namco about doing justice to the beloved franchise while highlighting some of the series' benchmarks, oddities, and most important entries.

THE VIDEO GAME LEGACY OF GOKU

North America's first Dragon Ball game, by technicality, is a Bandai-published NES game called *Dragon Power*, which released in 1988. Called *Dragon Ball: Shenron no Nazo* in Japan, it followed Goku and Bulma on their journey to collect the Dragon Balls to receive a wish. For the North American release, Goku kept his name, but Bulma became Nora, players threw Wind Waves instead of Kamehamehas, and the Dragon Balls were renamed Crystal Balls. The game did little to introduce American players to the Japanese phenomenon and exists today as a generally forgettable game in the NES library. It took more than 10 years for another



Dragon Ball Z Budokai 3

Dragon Ball game to make its way to North America, with *Final Bout*. Confusingly, this 3D PlayStation fighter was based on the GT saga of the anime, which would not air on American television for another six years. The game was universally panned by many American publications, predominantly citing poor controls.

In 2002, Dragon Ball video games experienced a boom with *Dragon Ball Z: Budokai* from developer Dimps. It released first in North America by two weeks, and sold four times as many copies in the United States than it did in Japan. Daisuke Uchiyama was the producer on *Budokai*. He had been working with Bandai Namco since 1994 with the game *Ultimate Battle 22* – the first PlayStation Dragon Ball game – being his first big responsibility. “Come to think of it now, it was unthinkable to let a freshman work on a new platform [laughs] but I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity,” Uchiyama says.

Budokai wasn't an exceptional fighting game (*Game Informer* gave it a 7.5), but it was the first Dragon Ball fighting game to release in tandem with the show's newfound popularity. From there, the Dragon Ball video game revolution in North America kicked off in earnest. “I'm not really sure,” Uchiyama says when asked why the game was an international hit. “This game was not supposed to be the game to elevate Dragon Ball games by any means,” Uchiyama says,

but laughs when saying he was ultimately pleased with the result.

The console follow-ups *Budokai 2*, *Budokai 3* (both of which released in North America first), and *Budokai Tenkaichi 2* all live on the PlayStation 2's list of best-selling games. So does the first *Budokai*, the best-selling Dragon Ball game of the generation with 3.5 million copies sold internationally. The new excitement even prompted a reprinting of *Final Bout* and the Western release of Uchiyama's *Ultimate Battle 22*, which came out in Japan eight years earlier.

For the next few years, Dragon Ball saw multiple new entries on assorted platforms in myriad genres. Most were fighting games, but the catalog expanded into action games, RPGs, and digital card games. In 2004, *Supersonic Warriors* released for Game Boy Advance, and its sequel released the following year on DS. These games are significant because they mark the first time Arc System Works worked on the Dragon Ball license. The studio went on to develop *Extreme Butōden* on 3DS and is currently working on *Dragon Ball FighterZ*.

FighterZ director Junya Motomura remembers *Supersonic Warriors* fondly, citing it as a time when he was at the height of his Dragon Ball Fandom. “That time I was so into it – I had the manga at my desk and I would think, ‘Okay, I need to look at that scene,’ and I could grab the exact book and I could go right to the right page,” he says.



WORKING WITH A LEGEND

Manga legend Akira Toriyama is best known as the creator of Dragon Ball, but he also has deep roots in video games. He served as a character designer for the *Dragon Quest* series, *Blue Dragon*, and the RPG classic *Chrono Trigger*.

Toriyama doesn't draw Dragon Ball manga much today – that honor belongs to artist Toyotarō – but he still contributes basic story ideas. He has a hand in the Dragon Ball video games, but it's a small one. For *Dragon Ball FighterZ*, he designed a new character, Android 21, offers general feedback on the art in the games, and checks the concepts.

“I've only met him in person once, and he was extremely friendly and a really nice person to talk with,” *Budokai* series producer Daisuke Uchiyama says. “I have the utmost respect for him, because when I was in elementary school, I often drew Dragon Ball stuff in my notebook. It felt like meeting your superhero in person.”



left to right:
Mito, Hirano, and Hiroki

THE DRAGON BALL VIDEO GAME KEEPERS

Within Bandai Namco, there is a collection of producers who have all pushed Dragon Ball video games to the successful franchise it is today. We spoke with them about their personal history with Goku's journey, and how that plays in to making Dragon Ball video games.

Ryo Mito

"I watched the Dragon Ball anime from when I was in grade school. I also followed Dragon Ball closely through *Jump* magazine. As for the games, the first one I played was Shenron no Nazo [Dragon Power in North America] on the Famicom. I played most of the Dragon Ball games on the Famicom, and for the Super Famicom, Super Butōden was very popular then, and I recall going to my friend's house to play the game."

Masayuki Hirano

"For me, back in grade school, the anime left a stronger impression on me. I played games single-player and with friends, but what really amazed me about Dragon Ball was when in school my friends would draw their own Dragon Ball manga with Goku named after themselves. Back then there was no other anime or manga where kids did such things, so in that sense it really struck me how amazing Dragon Ball really is."

Tomoko Hiroki

"During my grade school years, I watched and read the anime and manga. Back then, it was a trend among the boys, but being a girl, I was attracted more to Goku as my first love. The story shows Goku from when he was small and going out on adventures, but then at one point, he appears as an adult. That was when it struck me hard of how handsome he is. I don't think there are many *Shōnen* manga out there that has a main who takes stage during their youth and even onto being parents. Really, Goku taught me what first love was all about. [laughs]."

Fans of the show know that regardless of how powerful and heroic Goku is, there is no denying he is an absent father and an ever more absent husband, but that doesn't bother Hiroki. "I actually like that awful side of him, too. [laughs]."



POWER CHANGES

Dragon Ball's console video games leadership changed for the release of Budokai Tenkaichi. "I have my own policy for game series which is the following: create the first from scratch, evolve the second, complete the series by the third, and don't make a fourth," Uchiyama says. As a result, Uchiyama passed off producer duties to Ryo Mito and Spike Chunsoft took over development duties. "Pressure came from all sides, and I kept telling myself that I need to make the game sell," Mito says. It was a stressful experience for him, but the game was a commercial success establishing a new Dragon Ball Z franchise. Budokai Tenkaichi moved the game out of the 2D fighter space and into an over-the-shoulder perspective, but remained firmly in the fighting genre.

The next producer change came when Masayuki Hirano assumed duties for the first Xenoverse game, which was a hit even by Dragon Ball's high standards. "From a worldwide sales perspective, it's probably Xenoverse 1," Hirano says when asked which game was the most successful. Xenoverse had two primary innovations: It let players create their own character, and it told a revisionist history version of the Dragon Ball saga. "The plan started with our aim to actually change the history within Dragon Ball, and it gets scary when you know everybody around the world will judge you," Uchiyama says.

"Uchiyama-san told me that he wouldn't let me handle Xenoverse if I was going to make it into a run-of-the-mill game," Hirano says. "His words have stuck with me to this day, and the pressure was great, but I think his words that he passed on to me with the game helped in overcoming the pressure involved. Heartwarming, right? [laughs]."

Extreme Butōden for 3DS gave Tomoko Hiroki her first shot at producing a Dragon Ball game. It was developed by Arc System Works, and it fostered a relationship that carries forward for FighterZ. "I kept thinking of how we could make Dragon Ball feel new, so in Extreme Butōden, I decided to introduce characters that weren't introduced before as battle characters, such as the turtle or Bulma," Hiroki says. "I have fond memories of when we kept thinking of finding a different way to bring out the fun factor through other characters."



Dragon Ball Z Budokai



Dragon Ball Xenoverse

ONLY IN AMERICA

Not every Dragon Ball game that released in North America released in Japan. The Legacy of Goku, Buu's Fury, GT: Transformation, and Taiketsu were all exclusive to America, alongside Sagas, which was developed by Avalanche Software, who would later go on to create Disney Infinity. Collectible Card Game for Game Boy Advance and Dragon Ball Z: For Kinect were also American exclusives, even though they were developed in Japan.



**DRAGON
BALL Z**
超バトル伝説

超武闘伝 2



THE LOST SUPER NINTENDO DRAGON BALL Z GAME

Extreme Butōden on 3DS surfaced another Dragon Ball game in a surprising and very limited way. Super Butōden 2 is a Super Famicom game that released only in Japan in 1993, but certain pre-orders for Extreme Butōden awarded consumers a 3DS Virtual Console copy of Super Butōden 2. The game is entirely in Japanese and cannot be bought through normal means on the eShop.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Dragon Ball GT aired its final episode in 1997, which led to a drought in original Dragon Ball content until the release of the film *Battle of Gods* in 2013. Since then, a new manga and show came in the form of *Dragon Ball Super*. *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is the next big video game step for the franchise, and Hirano promises *Xenoverse* is far from complete.

Whether it's the release of new games keeping fans interested or new chapters in the seemingly endless saga, Goku and his friends have managed to maintain an impossible level of popularity, and that doesn't appear to be changing anytime soon according to Hirano. "Dragon Ball isn't just for Japan, but rather is for all the fans in the world to enjoy, and each country holds Dragon Ball dear in their own way. From that perspective, I believe this 'next stage' is for Dragon Ball to become a true, worldwide title." 🍕



Taking control of everything from goombas to dinosaurs in the final version of Super Mario Odyssey

BY BRIAN SHEA

As the next entry in one of gaming's most storied franchises, Super Mario Odyssey has a lot to live up to. From the first time we strolled through World 1-1 in Super Mario Bros. to the cooperative adventures we undertook in 3D World, players always have a baseline of expectations when it comes to a Super Mario release. Playability, creativity, and ease of access are paramount, but Nintendo isn't content with resting on its laurels. Instead, Super Mario Odyssey feels like the most reactive entry in over a decade.

Much has happened in the world of game design since Nintendo's mascot first jumped to three dimensions with Super Mario 64. Mario's subsequent 3D adventures changed the formula in meaningful ways, but Odyssey modernizes the series like we've never seen before. From giving the millions of coins Mario picks up actual monetary value to discarding the age-old lives system, Super Mario Odyssey refines the well-known formula while expanding to even stranger realms. I went hands-on with four new kingdoms to explore just how weird Nintendo can get.

» PLATFORM

Switch

» STYLE

1 or 2-Player Platforming

» PUBLISHER

Nintendo

» DEVELOPER

Nintendo

» RELEASE

October 27





Expanding Familiar Territory

For all the ways it updates the formula, the initial premise is bound to trigger some déjà vu: Bowser has kidnapped Princess Peach, and Mario needs to save her before his reptilian adversary marries her.

Recent games have presented idyllic introductory sequences with Mario, Peach, and their friends together before the main conflict presents itself. Breaking tradition, the opening of Super Mario Odyssey hits the ground running. From a black screen, the first thing we see is Mario dodge an incoming fireball from Bowser. Mario attempts to fight back, but Bowser is just too strong. Mario is ousted from the airship and his iconic cap is left sailing through the sky as Mario plummets to the ground below.

The last thing we see is his hat floating gently to the rear

of the ship, the propellers shredding it as the logo for Super Mario Odyssey appears across the screen. This action-packed intro ending on a distinct, almost somber note, signals bigger changes.

For director Kenta Motokura, continuing down the path of creating an overly familiar Mario experience wasn't an option. "I needed to break away from preconceptions, such as having the player experience or the level design be a certain way," he says. "However, it was very important because it gave me connections to new things."

The most notable new thing Motokura references is Cappy, a top-hat creature that befriends Mario shortly after the crushing defeat at Bowser's hands. Mario awakens to a monochromatic landscape with Cappy looming over him. Cappy explains they are in the Cap Kingdom, and the denizens have also been under attack by Bowser; he even kidnapped Cappy's sister. With a functioning ship the two could give chase in one kingdom over, Cappy suggests the two team up to take on their common enemy. The creature combines with Mario's shredded hat to create a new red cap for Mario.

With this new and enhanced lid, Mario's moveset grows substantially. Mario can toss the cap like a boomerang, use it like a springboard to reach higher ground, and even access new areas by plucking pegs out of the ground. However, the main benefit of Mario's partnership with Cappy is gaining control of other characters to unlock new abilities.

This is first demonstrated in the Cap Kingdom as Mario encounters a high ledge he can't reach. Cappy suggests Mario throws him at a nearby frog. The hat lands on the frog, it grows a mustache, and I'm suddenly in control of the amphibian.

As the frog, Mario easily gets up to the ledge. In fact, he can jump several stories in this form; using the frog's leaping abilities, I reach the top of the tower. I press the ZL button and Mario instantly returns to normal, leaving the frog dazed nearby.

Motokura looks at the new capture mechanic as an additional way to grant freedom to players. "As I was coming up with the new Mario game, I was thinking every day about how important the new player experience was, and what kind of things would be fun to interact with," he says. "During this process, I felt a new possibility in 'capturing,' which can freely create the player experience in an infinite number of ways."

ONE LIFE TO LIVE

One of the big changes in Super Mario Odyssey is doing away with the lives system that has been a mainstay in the series since the beginning. According to director Kenta Motokura, this change was actually a symptom of bigger changes. "We thought about how a lives system would work in this kind of broad, exploration-focused game," he says. "In this sort of game, there would be a lot of different restart points. We decided not to use the lives system because it was not an element that was absolutely necessary. We also thought that it would affect some users' desire to play because, while users who are good at the game would rarely see the (game over) screen that comes up when Mario runs out of lives, inexperienced users would probably end up seeing it frequently."

Instead, when Mario fails, players lose coins, which are more important than ever now that you can buy items with them. "The loss of coins does not fulfil the exact same role as the lives system – and we do not think that it needs to be the exact same – but we believe that it does function as a new type of penalty," Motokura says.

A Prehistoric Rampage

Capturing allows me to explore new mechanics left and right. As I play through the four kingdoms available to me, I capture a wide array of creatures, inspiring smiles as the new abilities at my disposal becomes apparent.

Flying across the world with the main objective of collecting power moons in Mario's hat-shaped ship, *The Odyssey*, you see things you've never seen before in a Mario game. Players were thrown off at E3 by trailers showing realistically proportioned humans in Metro Kingdom and the lifelike tyrannosaurus rex in Cascade Kingdom, but taking that T. rex on a rampage is a sight to behold.

As I enter Cascade Kingdom, I spot a group of chain chomps. By capturing them, I can pull back and release to send them hurtling forward. I could knock down the walls that impede my progress that way, or I could use the massive, sleeping dinosaur behind me to do it more efficiently.

The idea of allowing players to approach problems in different ways was something the team set out to do from the start. "We believe that the user's ability to solve in-game problems in multiple ways is an important factor because it creates differences between the gameplay experiences of individual users," Motokura says.

Using Cappy, I grab control of the T. rex and dash through the field of chain chomps, which are no match for the prehistoric beast. The chain chomps go flying as I run through the middle and smash down the wall to reveal the next portion of the kingdom.

Though *Super Mario Odyssey* is a fully 3D adventure, certain portions of the kingdoms allow Mario to enter 2D segments that transform the gameplay and graphics to be like those of the original *Super Mario Bros.* Cappy even remarks on how flat and blocky everything looks as Mario enters these retro sections.

The 2D sequence starts out simple, giving me goombas to squash and blocks to climb. As I reach the top of the area, a corner without a wall hints there's more to explore than meets the eye. I guide Mario past the edge and he wraps around to find a row of coins and a power moon. I burst out of the 2D section and immediately return to 3D gameplay and graphics.

The remainder of my time in Cascade Kingdom is spent performing platforming tasks (including a timed puzzle) to claim power moons. I even find a secret area with more intricate exploration, including a section that has me bouncing back and forth between 2D and 3D to find power moons scattered across the region.

These segments could be seen as distractions from my main objective, but they ultimately demonstrate a core philosophy the team had while designing the world and its sidequests. "We worked hard to make sure we clearly presented the main objective to the user, but allowed the user to decide whether they jump out of the mainstream and play in their own way," Motokura says. "The structure of the game still revolves around collecting power moons even if the user jumps out of the mainstream, so one of the main characteristics of the game is letting the user follow their interest towards the ultimate goal."



Throughout the various Kingdoms, Mario can use the coins he collects to purchase new outfits

Playing With Your Food

The food-themed Luncheon Kingdom gives me several interesting new mechanics thanks to its wide range of capture targets. You can capture almost everything, from series mainstays like stackable goombas to more outlandish things like forks jammed in walls that you can use to flick upward.

To progress across the lava-like stew that surrounds the platforms in Luncheon Kingdom, I toss Mario's hat on a lava bubble that is bouncing in and out of the hazardous liquid. Melding with the fireball, I can weather the heat and swim through hot

substances, but Mario returns to his normal self if he hits dry land. Later, I uncover a power moon by possessing a chef-themed Hammer Bro and chiseling away at cheese blocks to excavate a switch that unlocks the nearby collectible.

My time in Luncheon Kingdom culminates in Mario possessing a huge slab of meat. He wiggles around in a pile of salt to tempt a giant bird to grab it. Mario is successful and the bird carries him up to the stew it's making and I grab a nearby bundle of three power moons.

Luncheon Kingdom's sizzling food theme gives way to a refreshing tropical theme with a fizzy twist as I move on to Seaside Kingdom, a beachy locale where the sea is carbonated and a massive octopus is clogging the area's famous fountains and slurping away the water.

As I guide Mario to the shore, a squid encased in a sphere of water floats atop the surface of the sparkling ocean. I capture it and jet across the surface of the water like a speedboat, but also upward using the propulsion of the water surrounding the squid. Controlling the squid is a lot of fun. My favorite move is blasting high up in the air, then forward to fly through the sky. Unfortunately, you can only store a limited amount of spray, meaning you need to return to the water to replenish.

Though I've never been a fan of water stages in Mario games, *Odyssey* alleviates the issue by improving Mario's underwater controls and allowing you to capture aquatic creatures for better swimming. The squid can only skim along the surface, but if Mario possesses a cheep cheep, he can breathe underwater and explore the depths with ease.

In Seaside Kingdom, I'm tasked with finding four power moons scattered across the area. Each time I find one, I reopen a fountain by popping the cork out of it. The cork flies toward the octopus in the middle of the kingdom, bashing him in the head.

OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

Super Mario Odyssey sees Mario traveling to several different kingdoms in his hat-shaped ship, *The Odyssey*. From the frosty desert in the Sand Kingdom to the overwhelmingly green landscapes of the forest in Wooded Kingdom, each world has a distinct style that helps form the gameplay in that area.

The most striking kingdoms pull inspiration from realistic environments like New Donk City in the Metro Kingdom. According to director Kenta Motokura, placing Mario alongside realistically proportioned humans served a distinct purpose for the development team. "I thought that we needed a scale that was easy to understand," he says. "Users will wonder how high Mario can jump and how far he can fall. We thought that it would be easier for users to understand and relate to the world in which they actually live. Mario is a strong enough character that he fits in just fine in a realistic environment."



Changing Mario's outfit often gives unique benefits in specific situations



The repulsive rabbit characters known as Broodals harrass you throughout the story and deliver several miniboss fights along the way

Strange Showdowns

It wouldn't be a Mario game without imaginative boss battles. The fourth cork in Seaside Kingdom knocks the octopus off his pedestal and he plummets to sea level. Since he's in the middle of the ocean, I capture a squid and jet toward the downed creature.

The goal is to use the squid's jetting ability to blast water down on the octopus' glowing head, but that's easier said than done as the monster moves constantly and tosses dangerous seashells out of its mouth. The barrage intensifies the closer to victory you come, but it sticks out as my favorite part of my time with Super Mario Odyssey.

Throughout the game, you're taunted and challenged by the Broodals, a group of rabbits who are planning Bowser's wedding. As I battled the Broodal minibosses, I enjoyed how each one uses different mechanics.

In Luncheon Kingdom, a large Broodal spews purple liquid that slows you down if you wallow through it. Once you knock down a piece of his health, he goes into his hat and spins around, leaving a trail of the purple substance as he rockets across the arena.

Cascade Kingdom presents another giant Broodal. This one holds a chain chomp on a leash. By capturing the chain chomp, I get into a tug-of-war with the overgrown rabbit, then release as she's pulling to smack her in the face with her own weapon.

While these encounters were fun to conquer, Motokura has a soft spot for a boss battle in another kingdom. "My favorite

boss battle is the one with the boss Wiggler in the Metro Kingdom," he says. "This boss battle involves capturing characters called Sherms, which have cannons they can shoot, and using them to fight the boss."

Capping off The Experience

Though Super Mario Odyssey modernizes in places and fully embraces strange elements, it builds on the familiar core of the Super Mario franchise. Even with these new elements, the Super Mario DNA is undeniably present.

The way Odyssey dumps you into an open area with multiple objectives you can complete immediately harkens to the stage layouts in Super Mario 64, but that's not the only game Motokura recalls as inspiration. "There is the way how Super Mario 64 was created, and there is also a way to make use of the know-how from Super Mario 3D World," he says. "Because it is a sandbox style game like Super Mario 64 and Super Mario Sunshine, that element was prioritized quite a bit. We also believe that by responding to players' expectations, we can create a relationship of trust between the players and game design. We think that is one of the elements that created a relationship of trust and empathy in past Mario games."

Odyssey continues to impress with its refreshing take on the series. Motokura and his team have balanced old with new, and expected with unexpected. If what we've seen to this point is representative of the full game, Super Mario Odyssey's least surprising element could be that it winds up being a must-play for Switch owners. ♦





Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds

New mysteries and challenges await Aloy in the north

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Guerrilla Games

» **Release**
November 7

With a stunning open world, intriguing mysteries, and more giant mechanical beasts than you can shake a spear at, Horizon Zero Dawn easily ranks as one of 2017's biggest hits. But just because Aloy almost single-handedly staved off a robo-apocalypse doesn't mean her adventure is over. Guerrilla Games has been working hard on a new, sizable expansion to Horizon Zero Dawn, which will take our hero way up north to the icy homeland of the Banuk tribe. As we learned from our recent chat with Guerrilla, the frigid climate is the least of Aloy's worries.

The Frozen Wilds opens up a new location in the north of Horizon's already massive map, which serves as a border zone between the sun-worshipping Carja and nomadic Banuk tribe. While Aloy spent plenty of time getting to know the Carja in the main game, the Banuk's culture and customs were only lightly touched upon, making them an intriguing focus for the expansion. "This is a very harsh territory, as the Frozen Wilds would imply," says lead writer Ben McCaw. "It's very cold, very dangerous, and we wanted to really highlight how the Banuk have managed to eke out a

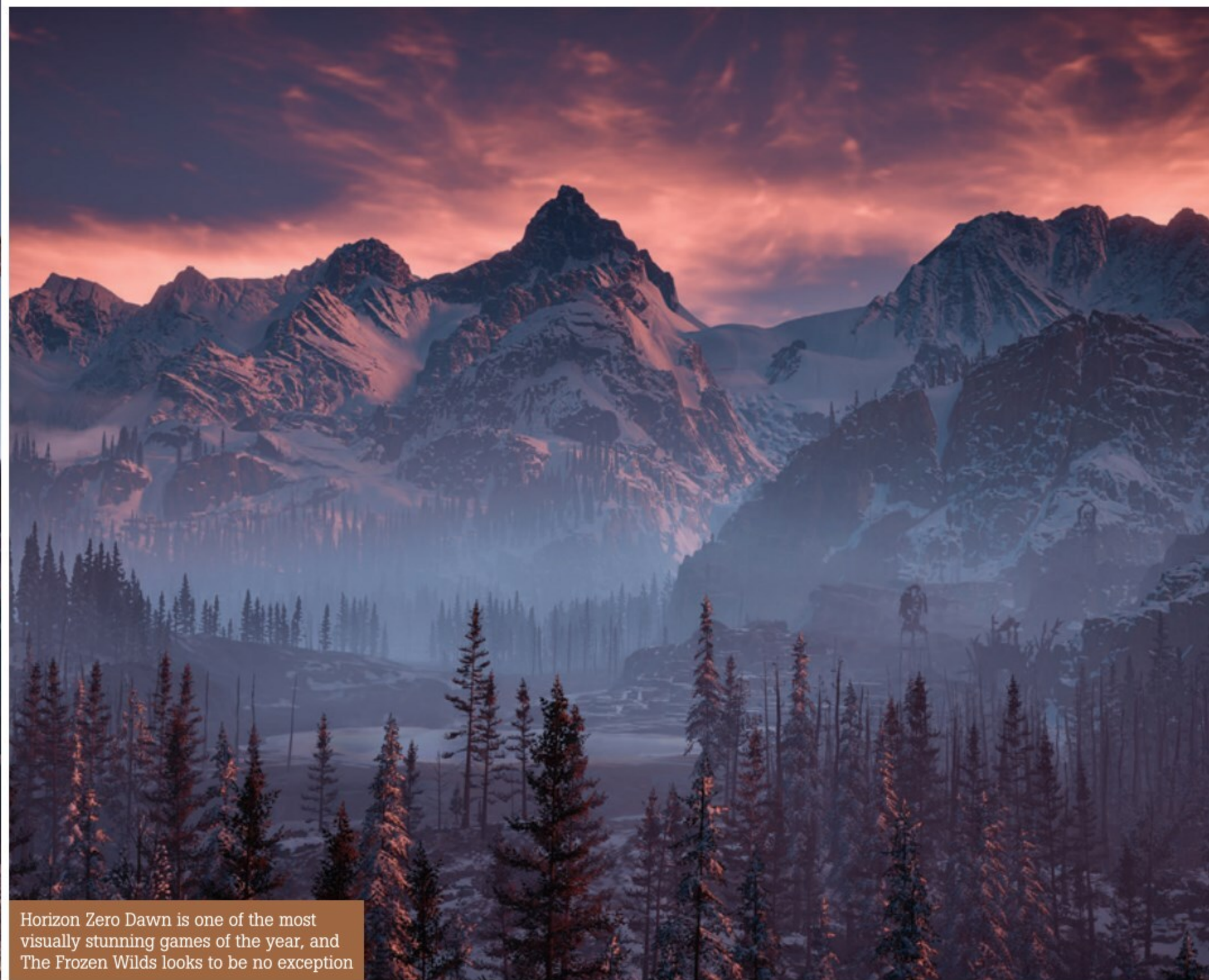
living there. You'll see all the different means that they've used to survive, how they find food and how they use machine parts to build structures and weapons that they need."

Aloy will meet a variety of new characters during her dealings with the Banuk, and Guerrilla is aiming to make these interactions more meaningful than some of her fleeting acquaintances in the main game. "One of the things we wanted to do with this expansion is create deeper relationships between Aloy and the characters that she meets," says quest and world design director David Ford. Not only does this mean you'll run into the same characters more frequently during missions, but they'll also occasionally join in on the adventure and fight alongside you. "You're going to be spending a lot of time with them, and their impact is definitely going to be felt," Ford says.

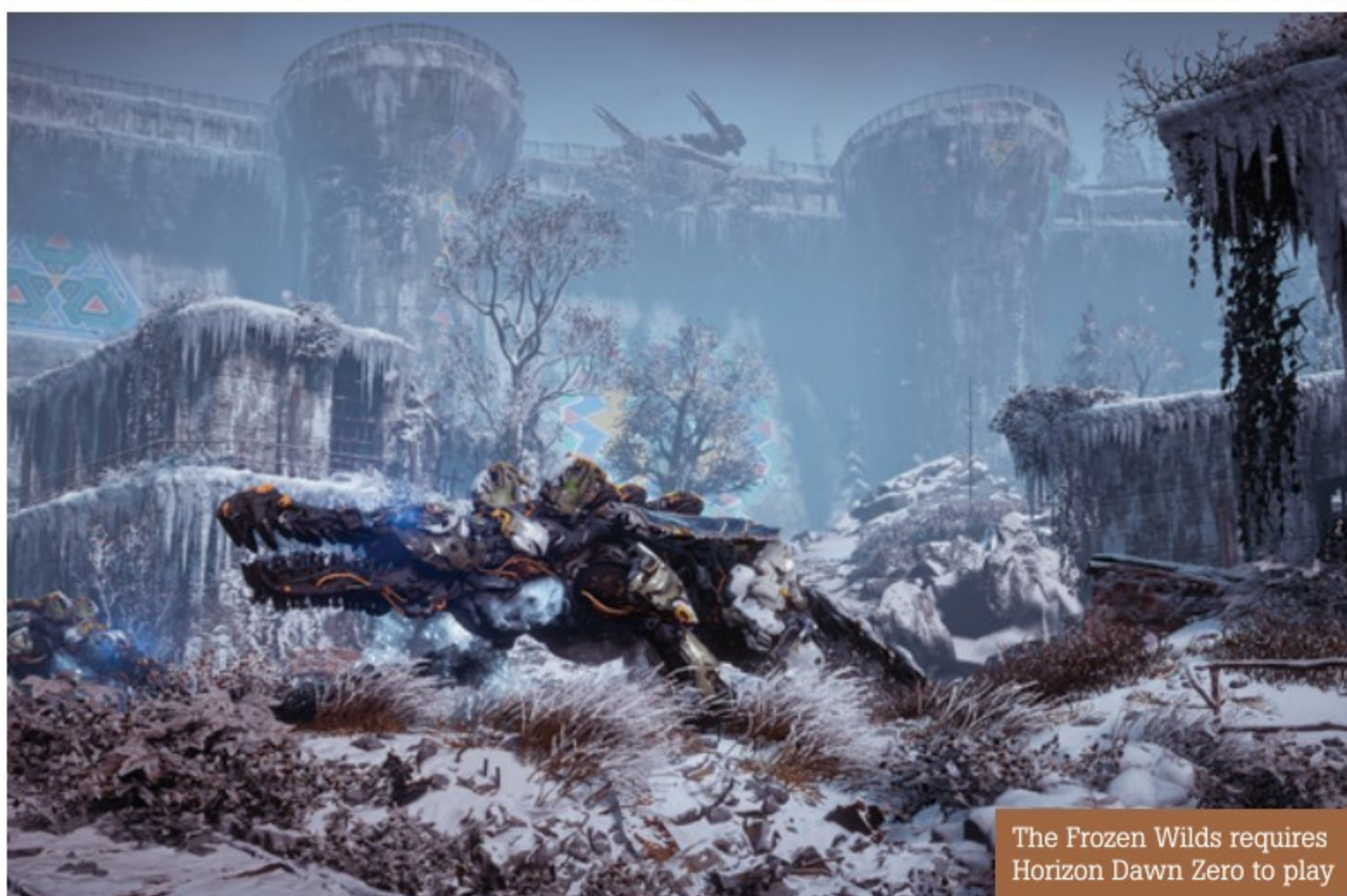
From the sounds of it, Aloy could certainly use the help; Guerrilla says The Frozen Wilds introduces a variety of new wildlife into the mix, including both organic creatures and also more mechanical beasts. And while the region opens up around halfway through the story (players who already

beat the game can simply use their end save, which reverts the world to before the final mission), it won't be a walk in the park. "It is going to be a really challenging area," Ford says. "It will be easier, obviously, for players who have played through a large portion of the game and have obtained better weapons and better armor... but it should provide a challenge for even the most advanced players."

Thankfully, Aloy has a few more tricks at her disposal in the expansion. Hanging around with the Banuk gives her access to new weapons inspired by the tribe's way of life. "We've tried to come up with some weapons that would make sense in their hands," Ford says. "They do behave differently than many of the weapons that you've experienced before, but you'll understand how they work as a player who's played some Horizon before and they'll fit neatly into your existing arsenal." Guerrilla says it's beefing up the rewards Aloy will receive for completing quests and activities, making all the side content The Frozen Wilds offers worth your time. A new collectible called "Bluegleam" can also be found and traded to vendors for new armor and gear.



Horizon Zero Dawn is one of the most visually stunning games of the year, and The Frozen Wilds looks to be no exception



The Frozen Wilds requires Horizon Dawn Zero to play



In addition to new gear, Aloy also has some new abilities to master. Guerrilla is crafting two brand-new skill trees for The Frozen Wilds, designed to enhance and expand upon Aloy's power to override mechanical creatures. For example, Mount Repair allows Aloy to heal a rideable ally creature, extending its usefulness in and out of battle. Guerrilla is expanding the level cap from 50 to 60 in order to accommodate the new abilities, so even if you've done everything Horizon currently has to offer, The Frozen Wilds should keep you busy.

While new weapons, abilities, and creatures are always nice, one of the

biggest draws for Horizon fans was accompanying Aloy on her personal journey of self-discovery, and unraveling the mysteries of her past. Guerrilla wants to deliver another intriguing mystery, yet is mindful of not tainting what it has already accomplished. "We want to make sure that whatever content we build into the expansion preserves the integrity of [Aloy's story]," McCaw says. "But we also want to make sure that there are mysteries in the expansion that are compelling to her. So she will find some paths to explore and some mysteries that she will find very compelling, and players will as well."

As to what those mysteries are,

Guerrilla unsurprisingly isn't saying. But both Ford and McCaw were quick to point out that the team is approaching The Frozen Wilds with the same importance and passion as the main game. "This is not something that was a real quick effort to just throw it out there after the game had shipped," Ford says. "This is something we've spent a number of months working really, really hard on and we've thought about it very carefully as we were formulating what we were going to do..."

Thankfully we won't have to wait long to find out what mysteries the north holds, as The Frozen Wilds launches on November 7. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

Fighting fiercer battles



» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Level-5

» **Release**
January 19

Being dropped into a Studio Ghibli-inspired world is breathtaking, providing a childlike wonder to every discovery. This was no doubt the highlight of *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*. The sequel tries to recapture that magic, but also shore up on some of the first game's weak points. At a pre-TGS event, I went hands-on and saw a presentation for *Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom*, and it's looking promising.

Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom may not have Studio Ghibli directly involved, but Level-5 and Bandai Namco were sure to include the

top talent from its predecessor for the sequel. This includes longtime Studio Ghibli fan and director Akihiro Hino, who wrote the story; character designer Yoshiyuki Momose, who worked as an animator on *Spirited Away* and *Porco Rosso*; and lastly composer Joe Hisaishi, who worked on film scores for several Ghibli films, including *Princess Mononoke* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. All three were core to the original game, complementing one another to deliver Oliver's story.

Ni no Kuni II once again centers on a coming-of-age story. This time around, however, the focus is on a young king named Evan. After being exiled from his kingdom, Evan must demonstrate his worth so he can reclaim the throne. Along his journey, he meets various other characters who help him on his path to becoming a truly just king. Evan's goal is to unite various kingdoms in harmony, and to do this, he needs to assist various denizens with unique challenges. At the presentation, we saw another kingdom, called Hydropolis, where Evan must confront an evil queen who rules with an iron fist. Every kingdom has its own king-maker, and they may be difficult foes

for Evan. In the case of Hydropolis, the creature Brineskimmer swims through the ocean and uses water attacks.

Instead of a turn-based battle system akin to the original, *Ni no Kuni II* uses real-time combat, giving you access to both melee and long-ranged attacks. You also have special abilities on cooldowns that pack a punch. The most interesting addition to combat is the Higgledies; these little creatures replace familiars and come in groups, somewhat reminiscent of *Pikmin*. On the battlefield, you can issue them commands, and they can do everything from attack to provide buffs for you. In certain situations, they may even provide hints for how to take down enemies. Battles are chaotic, forcing you to pay attention to enemy patterns and strike at opportune times. In addition, you want to make the best use of your Higgledies. I loved the fast-paced action, where I had to dodge, block, and use my special attacks to thwart a boss' assault. Bosses pull out all stops, throwing rocks, using charged attacks, and even trying to belly splash you.

Another fun new addition is Kingdom Mode. You aren't capturing familiars this time around, but you are recruiting





citizens to join your cause and expand your kingdom, Evermore. Expanding your kingdom not only shows up visually but also gives you crafting opportunities, from researching new magic to building item shops. You recruit new members by proving yourself to the citizens of other kingdoms during your journey.

Skirmishes is another new mode, but it's tied very closely to Kingdom Mode. As you recruit citizens, you can add them to your infantry for big battles. The types of citizens you recruit also determine your abilities in battle, such as whether you have archers or warriors. In this mode, Evan can control up to four units. Your soldiers attack automatically when you get near an enemy, but you can use the shoulder buttons for positioning to get the upper hand. While this may seem simple, there's more depth to it than meets the eye. You can use your guts gauge to improve attacking with an all-out assault, or choose quick march to get out of a sticky situation. In addition, the units' weapons have a rock-paper-scissors set of strengths and weaknesses, akin to Fire Emblem. Each unit also has its own special tactic, which is on a cooldown. In my



demo, one had the ability to call in an airstrike, while my other group could heal allies in peril. Another cool feature is shock tactics, which make you invincible for a short time to deal an onslaught of attacks.

Outside of recruiting familiars and experimenting with their abilities, I didn't find the first Ni no Kuni's battle system that engaging. Ni no Kuni II seems to be on the right track, with more variety, smoother controls,

and better A.I. Most importantly, battles are just more fun and engaging. Building up your kingdom and then playing in more tactical battles like skirmish mode are also nice touches. Hopefully, this helps break up any potential tedium. I'm more optimistic after my hands-on time, making me excited to see how Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom shapes when it releases early next year.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



Planet Of The Apes: The Last Frontier

A multiplayer movie experience

» Platform

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style

1 to 4-Player Adventure

» Publisher

The Imaginarium

» Developer

Imaginati Studio

» Release

Winter 2017

As often as narrative-driven games get called “interactive movies,” it’s a misnomer. Even the most cinematic of games, such as Telltale’s episodic adventures, feature segments where you wander around environments searching for clues. With Planet of the Apes: The Last Frontier, developer Imaginati Studio is creating an experience you can truly call an interactive movie.

Taking place between *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* and *War for the Planet of the Apes*, The Last Frontier follows a colony of apes who fled from the San Francisco outbreak to the Rocky Mountains and cultivated their own tribal culture. The patriarch of the tribe has three sons, and you play as the middle child, who tries to mediate your overly aggressive older brother (Juno) with the more passive tendencies of the younger child (Tula). The story also jumps among human and ape perspectives, giving players a chance to empathize with both sides of the conflict.

The demo we were shown follows the three brothers as they attempt to

raid a small human outpost for supplies. Their father has forbid them from interacting with humans in any capacity, but Juno is adamant the brothers can take the supplies without provoking the ire of humans at large. Before we ever make a moral choice, we see the high-fidelity facial

animation that’s become standard in other big-budget narrative-driven games, such as *Until Dawn* and *Beyond: Two Souls*. The apes animate beautifully, and while the edges of the fur could use some work, that was the only sticking point in otherwise immaculate visuals.





The lack of in-world interactions means the focus is almost entirely on visuals

We have to decide whether we'll enter the camp stealthily or guns blazing, which is where *The Last Frontier* changes up a few aspects of the narrative-game formula. As an interactive film, there are no gameplay segments beyond making moral decisions, which means the game moves at a brisk clip.

The other major change gets your friends involved. Capitalizing on the tendency of players who make narrative games like *Until Dawn* a group activity, Imaginati lets multiple players make decisions in a couple of ways. During calmer, more dialogue-oriented segments, up to four players (who can play using either a controller or by downloading an app on their phone) each make their own choice at their leisure, and majority rules. In the case of a tie, players can opt to

use a tiebreaker to force their decision onto the group. Once someone uses a tiebreaker, they can't use it again until every other player has used one. During action-oriented segments, players have a limited amount of time to make choices, and the votes must be unanimous in order to pass. These choices are designed to have players make quick arguments for their case during tense moments.

According to Imaginati Studio, the dialogue choices are narrowed from the usual four you might see in other games to two more concentrated options. This is to get groups to talk out issues that don't have a clear-cut "good" or "evil" choice, but still offer different approaches. For example, as Tula begins to doubt the incursion into the outpost, he becomes louder and louder, and players must choose whether to passively reassure him everything will go smoothly, or to forcefully shout him down before he arouses attention. Our group tried to calm him down at first, but after our first few attempts didn't work out, we decided to shut him down forcefully.

A second scene has us take control of a group of humans who have tied up one of the apes. Here the main choice involves whether you torture the ape for information, or whether you'll relent and take a more considered approach. As with the apes, the moral choices are tied to particular people; which choice you take will alter your relationships with various members of your group, leading to different outcomes and situations down the road. Imaginati Studio plans on having seven major endings



depending on your choices.

The team is targeting a two-to-three-hour runtime for a number of reasons. For one, it allows groups to experience the entire story in one session, as well as planting it firmly in the ballpark of a feature film. This also lets the team make decisions more meaningful and diverse, which allows for multiple playthroughs. To foster this, you can go back and replay any individual scene in the game, which lets groups go back and alter their choices more easily.

As narrative-driven games become more and more popular, the genre will need to take steps forward to keep things interesting. *The Last Frontier* looks to do just that, offering enough twists to make it conceptually interesting while also not detracting from telling an engaging story that benefits from interactivity. » **Surriel Vazquez**



Secret Of Mana

Reviving a classic

» **Platform**
PS4 • Vita • PC

» **Style**
1 to 3-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
February 15



When Secret of Mana originally launched back in 1993, it stood out for its vibrant visuals, fantastic music, and co-op elements, trailblazing in the action/RPG genre. Now Square Enix hopes to recapture the love of old stalwarts and introduce a new generation of gamers with a remake of the beloved classic. This new version includes 3D visuals, voice acting, and a newly arranged score with the help of original composer Hiroki Kikuta.

After remaking the first game in the series, Adventures of Mana (previously known as Final Fantasy Adventure)

last year, Square Enix decided to give Secret of Mana a similar upgrade. When the series hit its milestone 25th anniversary last year, Square Enix realized the games weren't available on current hardware, compelling the team to remake these classics.

As fans remember, Secret of Mana had three-player co-op, which was rare for the role-playing genre at the time. Producer Masaru Oyamada says the co-op functions in the remake exactly like the original, meaning it's offline couch co-op. "You have three players sitting next to each other on the couch with three controllers – all playing at the same time," Oyamada says. "I think a lot of the enjoyment that people have in their memories of the original game relies on that play style. We felt it was best to have that recreated in the same way."

While this may be a remake, don't expect massive changes to the game's core. Oyamada and his team are set on sticking as close to the original as possible. "The overall construction of the game and the content of the game is the same as the original – nothing has been cut," Oyamada says. "The additions and tweaks we've added to the game are more subtle, more for accessibility and ease of play. For example, dashing and the run button used to only work in a single direction, now you can do it freely. The other thing for ease of control is controlling the ring commands for allies used to be very difficult for one person, but we've made that a lot easier."

Some of the new features include cutscenes and more detailed character interactions. "In the original, it was really left to the imagination of the player to figure out what the main party was doing and how they were talking to each other between the

adventures they went on," Oyamada says. "You now get to see conversations between [the party members] and little scenes that add to the story."

This also marks the first time characters are voiced for the game, but Randi, Primm, and Popoi have appeared in other Square Enix collaborations using voice actors to say their iconic lines. "When I saw [those], it actually felt very natural" Oyamada says. "It didn't feel out of place at all, so when it came to doing the remake of the game, I thought we should go with voices from the start." If you want to experience the remake like the original, there is an option to turn the voice acting off, too.

Secret of Mana's art style has always been core to its identity. Unsurprisingly, the shift to 3D visuals has met mixed reactions from fans based on the first glimpses. "It'd be very difficult from a technological perspective these days to do development in the old pixel style graphics," Oyamada says. "And I think the other thing is if we did decide to go along with that, we wouldn't be exceeding the original. We thought it'd be better to go for an evolution – a more modern update of the graphics for 3D. But, we did very much pay attention to make sure they were not something that would put off the original fans, that they wouldn't feel too out of place."

Time will tell how the remake fares and if it can toe the tricky line between pleasing old fans and newcomers. If all goes well, there's even potential for it to revive the Mana series. "I very much think about the series and the remake in that way myself," Oyamada says. "If we can hear the same kind of opinions from fans, I think that will link through into the future of the series."

» **Kimberley Wallace**





Super Meat Boy Forever

An unexpected route

Though it's been seven years since the launch of the original Super Meat Boy, we've yet to receive a true sequel. This will finally change in 2018, when Team Meat launches Super Meat Boy Forever – but this might not be the follow-up fans were anticipating.

Rather than simply giving fans more of the same, Team Meat is mixing things up. Meat Boy and Bandage Girl now autorun through procedurally generated levels. In addition, players no longer maintain complete control of the characters while in mid-air, but the developers make up for it by granting new offense and traversal abilities. You can punch, slide, and even dive-kick through these worlds, giving you new ways to tackle the challenges (as well as giving Team Meat new ways to design levels). Stringing these moves together feels smooth once you get the hang of it, and I loved punching through an enemy in mid-air before diving diagonally between saws for a flashy escape from danger.

While this may sound like too drastic of a shift for players' likings, I walked away from my hands-on time optimistic. The idea of procedural generation might give you pause, but Team Meat is being careful and intentional in its approach to this oft-used convention. Rather than throwing random bad-dies, saws, and platforms at you to create a difficult and indecipherable mess, sections are handcrafted to flow together and create new stages

as you replay them over time. In addition, after you beat a stage, the next time you play it, you get a more difficult version to conquer.

Team Meat tells me that each stage in Super Meat Boy Forever is as long as multiple stages from the original game. To help account for the increased length, many levels feature single-use checkpoints to help you get through them. This means that if you die after reaching a checkpoint, you return to that marker, but if you die again, it's back to the beginning of the stage. This adds tension to the playthrough, while still giving players somewhat of a safety net.

And if what I played is any indication, you will need those checkpoints.

The number of close calls and brutal deaths my poor Meat Boy suffered was amazing. Thankfully, Super Meat Boy Forever gives you a quick restart much like its predecessor, leaving the player vulnerable to “one more try” syndrome. As time ran short on my demo, I continually tried to squeeze in extra attempts to beat the stage I had been slowly making progress on.

After going hands-on with Super Meat Boy Forever, it's clear that this is a true sequel. The precise, frantically paced platforming of the first game is intact, but it's presented in a different manner. Team Meat understands what made the first game so special, as that secret sauce is still present here. » **Brian Shea**

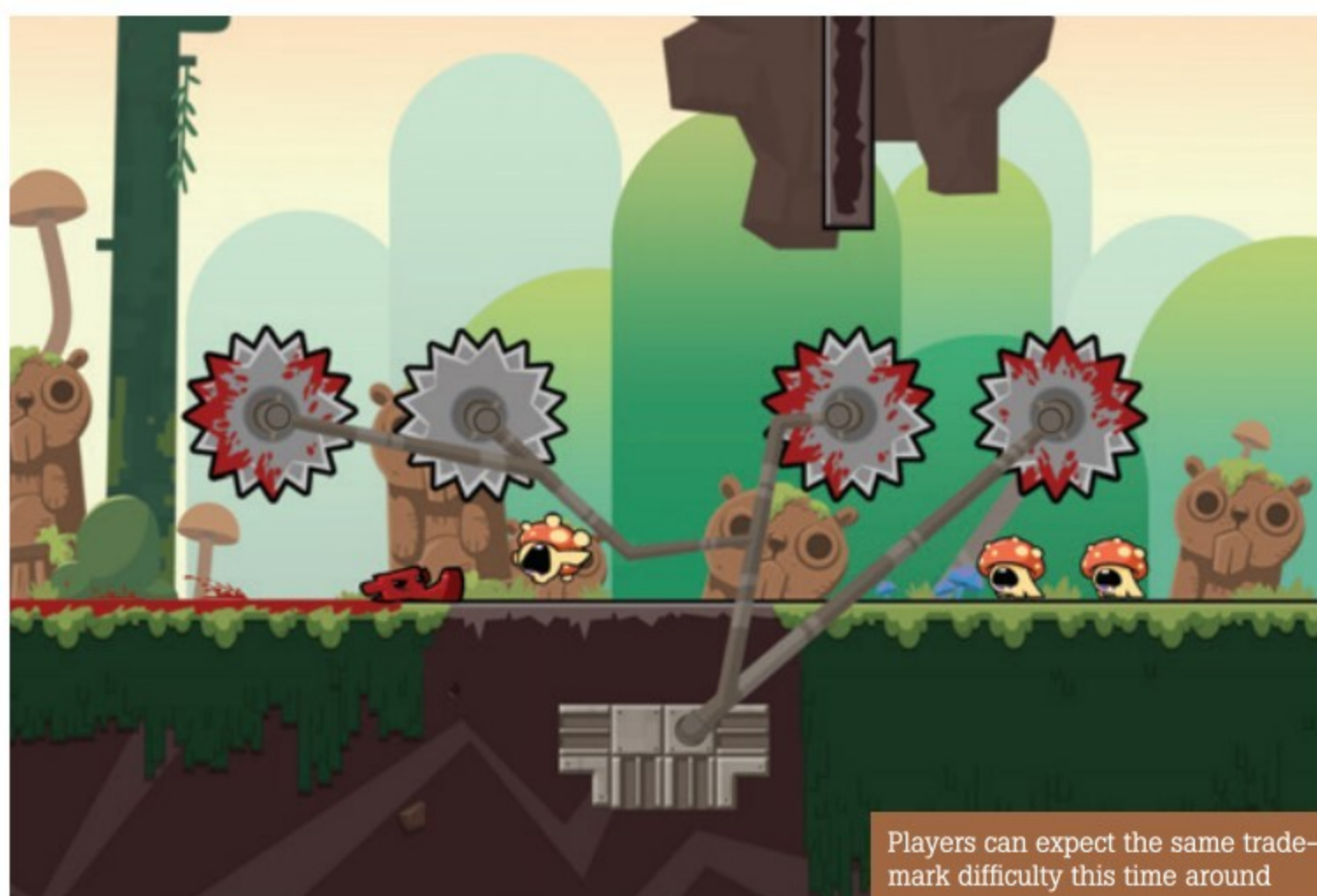
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
PC • iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Team Meat

» **Developer**
Team Meat

» **Release**
2018





The Sims 4

Making the jump to console

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Maxis, Blind Squirrel Games

» **Release**
November 17

Three years after its initial PC release, The Sims 4 is finally making its way to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Not only will console gamers get in on the fun of controlling sims by shaping their lives and building houses, but this edition comes with plenty of the content that The Sims 4 lacked at the outset of its PC release.

Since its rocky PC debut, where many mainstays – from the toddler stage to dishwashers – were absent, Maxis has been adding feature updates and DLC to the base game. With these additions in place, Maxis feels now is the right time for this type of experience to be put on the console market. “We all agreed that simulation games, and really games for our audience, are quite absent on Xbox One and PS4,” explains senior producer Michael Duke.

To make a console edition happen, Maxis teamed up with Blind Squirrel Games, who worked on BioShock: The Collection and Disney Infinity 3.0. This allows them to manage the tricky balance between creating a console version and still providing support for PC. It also helped them tackle the biggest challenge: updating the controls for console. “When porting a game from PC to console, one of the biggest differences you find are between the mouse and controller, as there are way fewer buttons to work with,” Duke explains. “Our goal was to build a console version that was compatible with live service updates and PDLC packs that we want to bring to the platform down the line.

So we made sure we had a lot of time for continued iteration of the control scheme, which we will continue to do until we are satisfied with the usability.”

When The Sims 4 debuts on console, all the free content updates added to the PC version since launch will be included, such as lot traits, The World of Newcrest, repair services, nannies, create a sim upgrades, and more. All 50 patches that hit The Sims 4 PC base game are also making their way to the console version at launch. “Players are not buying The Sims 4 circa 2014, they are getting The Sims 4 2017 Edition, complete with toddlers, ghosts, pools, and more,” Duke says.

Sadly, the console editions won’t have mod access or The Gallery, which let you download other people’s designs, at launch. Hopefully, these are in consideration for the future. The PS4 and Xbox One versions will, however, offer support for console-based sharing features, from

using the free cam to snap screenshots to making videos to share.

As for the DLC already released on PC, plans are already in place for those to eventually hit console. “We intend to bring DLC from PC over to console at a steady rate, which we will be revealing some of soon,” Duke teases. “But regardless, players can definitely look forward to us bringing over the content they want most to the platform.”

So far, it seems the team is committed to making sure the console edition contains all the gameplay of its PC brethren. In the past, The Sims on console has never measured up to the PC versions, but this could be the closest the two get. In addition to including all the updates, bug fixes, and having a DLC pipeline, the power of the current console generation allows console gamers to get high-end graphics. “This is far and away the best The Sims has ever looked on my TV,” Duke says.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



Hidden Agenda

Playing everyone against each other

In 2015, Supermassive Games made bloody waves with *Until Dawn*. The narrative-focused PS4 exclusive delivered scares and an interesting take on interactive storytelling, allowing you to make choices about who lives and dies in a classic slasher-film setup. After a string of VR titles, Supermassive returns to interactive storytelling with *Hidden Agenda* – a thriller that makes use of Sony's PlayLink system, which allows players to hook into certain games with their mobile devices.

Unlike *Until Dawn*, *Hidden Agenda* was conceptualized as a multi-player experience. "Hidden Agenda has a focus on group play," says Supermassive CEO Peter Samuels. Using Playlink, up to six players can

log into the game with their phones or tablets and vote on character choices in a style of play that's similar to Jackbox Party Pack. Players are encouraged to cause chaos during these situations as information and objectives are sent to their phone, giving context to their choices that other players might not have. The goal is to try and convince other players to vote for a certain decision, which is intended to create an atmosphere of paranoia. Supermassive has not yet made it clear what the incentive is for players to accomplish their secret objectives.

For those who just want to play the game without any of the multiplayer functionality, Samuels says that single-player is viable: "The story is

the core of the experience and even without dynamic group play we expect players will enjoy shaping the narrative through the choices they make."

Supermassive has remained tight lipped on *Hidden Agenda*'s actual story details except saying it's more of a thriller than horror genre-wise, centering on a *Saw*-esque serial killer known as "The Trapper," and that your choices still determine how the story plays out and who lives and dies during the game. The game is split between two characters, police officer Becky and district attorney Misty, but we don't know what their motives are or their relationship to The Trapper.

Samuels says *Hidden Agenda* will probably take two to three hours to complete and features "multiple paths and outcomes." The brief snippets of gameplay we've seen have resembled *Until Dawn*'s aesthetic and gameplay, with characters in tense situations, like standoffs or intense interrogations, having to make difficult choices as pulse-pounding music plays.

Until Dawn was one of the biggest and most surprising hits of 2015. We'll have to wait until October to see if this follow-up lives up to the innovation of its gory, enticing predecessor but the social aspects of the game as well as Supermassive's pedigree have me eagerly anticipating the chance to precariously hold life and death in my hands once more. » **Javy Gwaltney**

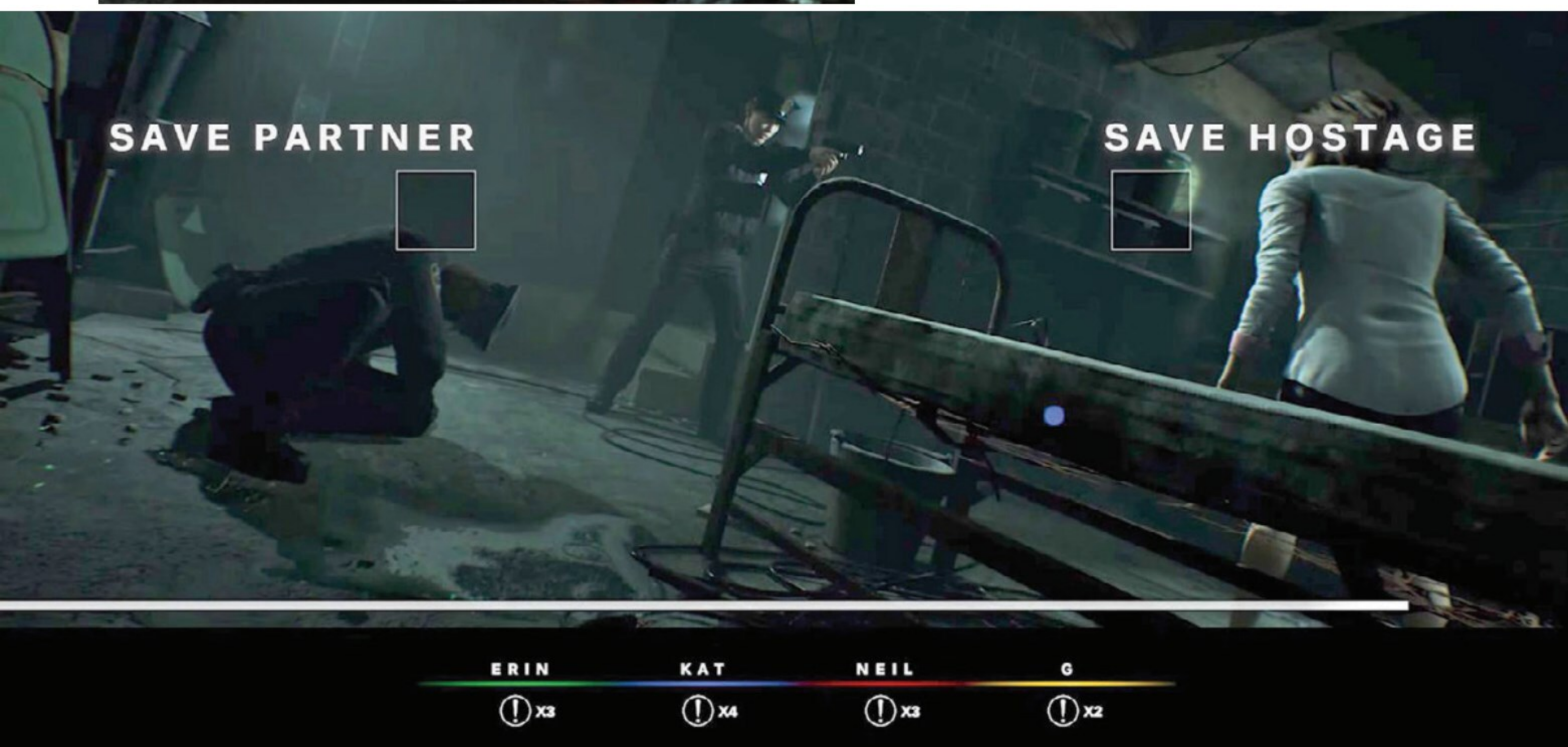
» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 to 6-Player
Adventure

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Supermassive Games

» **Release**
October 24





Xenoblade Chronicles 2

Exploring a small part of the massive world

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Monolith Soft

» **Release**
December 1

Today, it's standard for players to traverse enormous landscapes and impressive maps in fantasy RPGs. Despite the expectation, I was still blown away by the sheer scope of Xenoblade Chronicles 2's world.

In Xenoblade Chronicles 2, the entire surface of the planet is covered by water. Massive titans float atop the surface, serving as the only inhabitable locations for non-aquatic organisms. My gameplay session drops me into the belly of one of these mammoth titans. Just like the original, titans house vast and distinct landscapes; the one I explore features

a fantastical forest with several lakes and even a bustling town.

I control Rex, the main character, who is traveling with Nia, a fellow human, and Tora, a cute napon. Each character is accompanied by personified weapons called blades. Pyra is a fiery redhead who is my current equipped blade. As I approach my first battle, I learn that it's crucial to swap between my blades if I want to be successful against tougher enemies.

The area of the titan I explore is gorgeous and massive. As I approach the town, I opt to help a group of mercenaries who are in over their heads with a group of baddies. I intervene, taking them out in swift fashion. Afterwards, the guys I helped tell me they will keep training to one day be of worth, which feels like a hint that they could come back to help me in the future. I enter the town, climb many stairs to the highest point, and gaze out upon the world. The vista is impressive, and gives me a great feeling of the enormity of the locale. Despite how massive it looks and feels, it's only a portion of one titan in the game.

Rex auto-attacks in battles, making positioning and managing my blades my only concern. Though Pyra is awesome at dealing fire attacks, she can't

attack forever since her arts operate on a cooldown. I exhaust her attacks, then switch to Kisaragi, an ice-based blade. Kisaragi has my favorite art so far – the ability to launch enemies into the air and allow allies to combo them relentlessly. Thanks to the blades' arts, battles are engaging and strategic despite the fact that Rex auto-attacks. When you string together a long combo involving multiple blades, the controls feel smooth and easy to execute, as they revolve around the face buttons of the Joy-Cons. The most exciting moments came as my party gauge filled up and I began chaining attacks together across multiple characters and triggering timed button presses for additional effects on my attacks.

Xenoblade Chronicles fans who felt let down by Xenoblade Chronicles X on Wii U should find peace of mind in the direction of this entry. Several elements veer closer to the original Xenoblade Chronicles. Not only are the Skells from X nowhere to be found, but Chronicles 2 is more story-focused and the combat focuses more on combos. RPG-loving Switch owners have been eyeing this game since it was announced, and it looks like they'll have plenty to do when it launches in December. » **Brian Shea**



WWE 2K18

Let's get ready to tumble

The WWE never sleeps, and neither do the developers of 2K's wrestling games. This year, the series drops the largest roster of wrestlers of any game in WWE history and adds a new carry and drag system that makes it easier to toss superstars around the ring based on their weight. For a quick overview of the modes, we spoke with Visual Concepts' designer Jason Vandiver.

In this year's MyCareer mode, players can explore backstage areas and interact with other WWE Superstars and GMs who give you side quests. For example, some characters might ask players to ambush a rival during an interview or go toe-to-toe with them in a promo to make them look good. You customize your path to WrestleMania by making choices that shape the overall narrative.

"We wanted MyCareer to be more experiential this year and enable players to spend more time interacting with the unique personalities across all the WWE," Vandiver says. "Rather than looking at menus to find out who you should ally with or make your rival, you can simply go talk to these



people or ambush them in the backstage environment. Want an interview with Renee Young? Simply go up to her and ask for an interview."

Another big addition for this year's game is the Road to Glory mode, which challenges users to compete in a series of challenges to earn loot cases that reward your created characters with new moves, boosts,

and in-game currency. This mode follows WWE's real-time PPV schedule, meaning shortly after WWE 2K18 launches, Road to Glory will host events alongside WWE's TLC pay-per-view.

There is a lot of meat on WWE 2K18 bones, so hopefully the final package is what wrestling fans have been looking for. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Fighting
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Yuke's, Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 17
(PS4, Xbox One),
Fall (Switch)

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Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes

An unlikely return



» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Grasshopper
Manufacture

» **Developer**
Grasshopper
Manufacture

» **Release**
2018

During the Switch reveal event back in January, Grasshopper Manufacture CEO Goichi Suda (aka Suda51) revealed a new game starring No More Heroes protagonist Travis Touchdown coming exclusively to Switch. During the recent Nindies Showcase, we learned it's not a spin-off, but rather a new game in the No More Heroes franchise.

This branding was an intentional decision by Suda to make the focus more on the title character than the long-running franchise. "We didn't want to say this is a No More Heroes game; we wanted to put the spotlight on the fact that Travis is coming back," he says. "As far as the actual title of the game and how it relates to the No More Heroes series, I wanted to wait for a bigger chance – for example, the [Nindies Showcase video] – to properly announce what exactly the game is going to be and the exact title and everything."

The reveal trailer begins with Badman, a masked assassin, screaming down the highway in a muscle car. Looking at a photo of a young girl, he says, "We'll be seeing him soon enough. Be patient." Spitting his cigar out the window, he mashes on a nitro button and speeds over the horizon.

He pulls up to a quiet campsite in the woods. The assassin grabs a baseball bat, cracks open a canned beverage, and stealthily enters the lone trailer on the lot. The interior of the trailer is illuminated only by the flashing glow of a video game on the television. From behind, he approaches a man playing what appears to be top-down shooter Hotline Miami. A voice calmly says, "Take one more step, and you're dead."

Badman yells, "It's too late" and smashes the head of the man at full-force with the bat. To his surprise, the man in front of the television was a mannequin. The real target he's after, Travis Touchdown, is behind him. "You wanna play? Let's play," he says as he draws his trademark beam katana. The two clash as Badman reveals the reason he's there: Travis murdered his daughter.

As the battle intensifies, the game console begins moving on its own. The Death Drive MK-II floats toward the combatants and they are sucked into the system.

Travis Strikes Again focuses on retro gameplay that harkens back to classic video games, which is a departure from the typical slash 'em up style of

action gameplay from past entries. That said, Suda isn't completely ready to leave that style in the past. "There will be parts like that in this game as well, but this new game is focusing mainly on Travis going further inside the [retro game system]," he says.

Once inside the system, Travis tackles six different retro style titles, each with its own distinct set of rules. "I wanted to focus on how Travis would interact with the individual rules and the individual vibe from each game," Suda says.

While Suda won't divulge which genres will be represented among the six titles, he did express interest in including one particular style from the past. "One of the games that I'm really looking forward to putting in is the sort of old-school vector-scan type game where Travis goes directly into the game and he's basically playing his own vector-scan game," he says.

We still have much to learn about Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes, but we're just excited to see the first entry in the franchise in nearly a decade. Though it is a completely different take on the franchise, it gives fans hope that the adventures of Travis Touchdown will carry on.

» **Brian Shea**

Shovel Knight: King Of Cards

Stacking up nicely

When Shovel Knight initially launched in 2014, it became an instant favorite for fans of retro platformers. Since then, multiple campaigns have launched, introducing new playable characters. Together, these campaigns make up the Treasure Trove, the definitive edition of Shovel Knight, but it isn't complete yet. The final chapter, King of Cards, releases next year.

This prequel story shifts the focus to King Knight to tell the tale of how he traveled the world to defeat the other kings and become the one true ruler. The campaign introduces approximately 30 new levels King Knight can approach with his new stable of skills and heirloom items. King Knight's most basic move is a shoulder bash, where he charges at an enemy to deal damage and knock them back. If you bash a wall, King Knight propels upward to perform a spin-jump. Using this technique, he can damage enemies from above or bounce off hazards. King Knight also has access to new heirlooms such as a drill-like projectile and a hammer that earns you extra hearts when you connect.

In addition to enemies from past campaigns, King Knight also battles new foes like rat king, an aggressive, tangled group of flying rats, and bigger iron knights who you must either attack from above or sumo off of platforms. I also fought a challenging King Pridemoor boss battle, where he summoned a giant suit of armor and jumped around the stage, bashing the ground and summoning griffins.

If you don't feel like adventuring, King of Cards also includes an intriguing new card game where you place

cards with the hopes of covering up the most gems on the board. Each card has directional arrows on them, which lets you push an opposing card in that way. This adds a layer of strategy as you try and not only push your opponent's cards off the table and away from the gems, but also position your cards so that they can remain on the gems until the match is over.

King of Cards looks like a worthy addition to the Shovel Knight Treasure Trove, and though this is the final campaign, I hope this isn't the last time we visit this world. » **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
PS3 • Wii U • 3DS • Vita
PC • Mac • Linux • FireTV

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Yacht Club Games

» **Developer**
Yacht Club Games

» **Release**
2018



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GAME OF THE MONTH

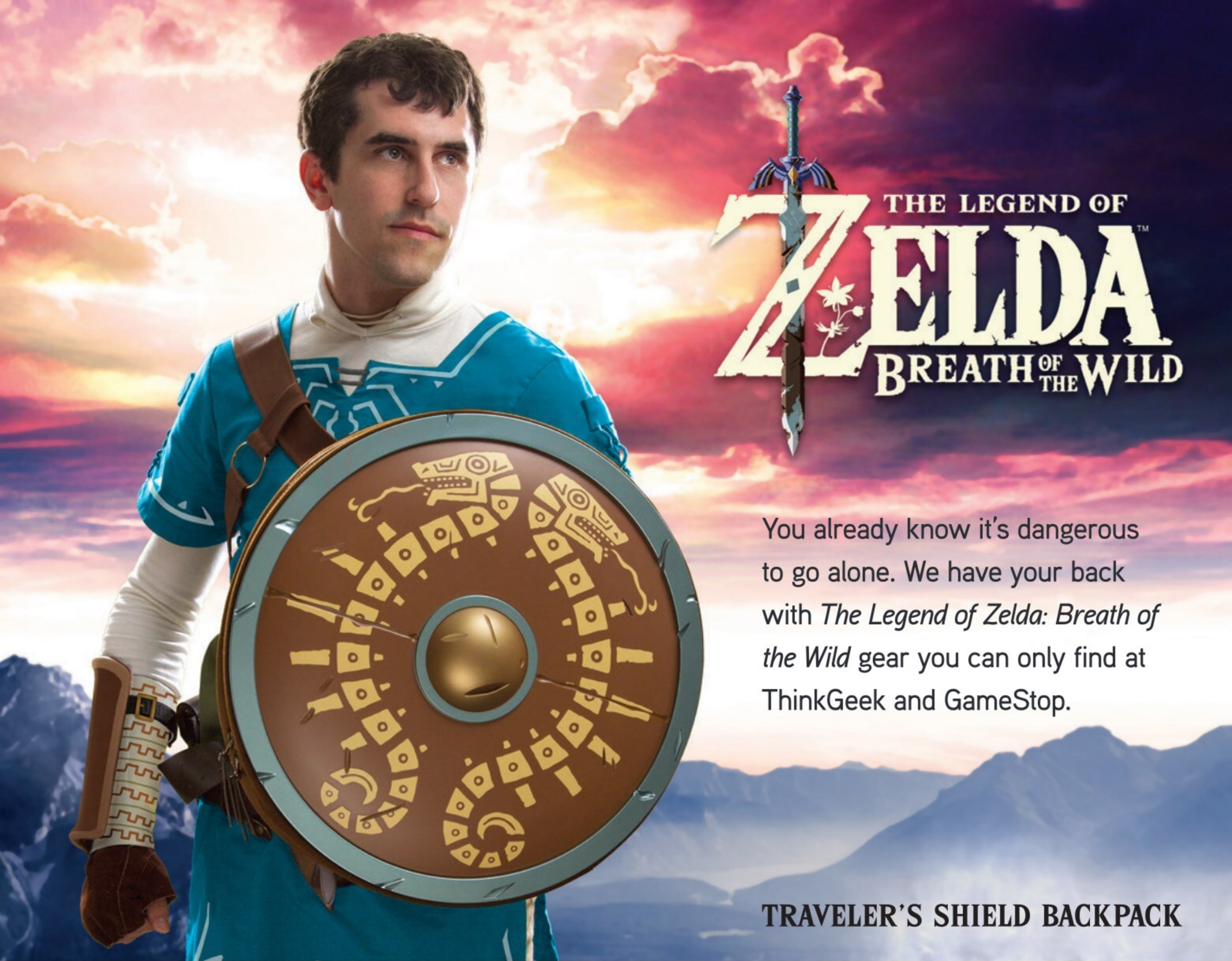
We usually pick only one Game of the Month, but we just couldn't decide between this issue's two high-scoring titans. With **Divinity: Original Sin II** (see page 76), Larian Studios sets a new standard for freedom and choice in RPGs. **Metroid: Samus Returns** (see page 89) is a glorious return to 2D form for one of Nintendo's all-star heroes. Both games provide unforgettable experiences, so why limit yourself to just one?

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Duplicates in lootboxes.

AWARDS

 gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
 gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
 gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
 gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue



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Destiny 2

A streamlined future

9

gameformer
GOLD

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter Publisher Activision Developer Bungie Release September 6 Rating T

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Rebuild your legend after a devastating attack, and join friends to explore a fantasy vision of the solar system's future

» Graphics

Astonishing art design in every direction

» Sound

An awe-inspiring soundtrack lends emotional depth, while the voice cast carries the weight of a playful script

» Playability

Bungie's gunplay continues to set the industry standard

» Entertainment

A riveting campaign adventure that ably transitions into a cyclical game of progression, cooperation, and competition

» Replay Value

High

Bungie took a big chance when it chose to reset three years of progress and start all players, new and returning alike, at ground zero for Destiny 2. The risk has allowed for a reinvention of troublesome systems and a new opportunity for players to climb the level curve, while still maintaining the successes learned across the many updates of the first Destiny. The result is a game that is more accessible, streamlined, and sensible, with a clear through line in both gameplay and story. However, this refined sophomore effort in the Destiny universe comes at the cost of flexibility to play how you want and fully customize the experience as you go.

Newcomers to Destiny 2 will discover the same core precepts that have kept others engaged for years. Hundreds of years in the future, humanity's fate has been reshaped by a powerful alien entity, spreading our reach across the solar system. A later inexplicable collapse has left a scattered people scrambling for survival, guided and protected by deathless Guardian warriors. The fiction seamlessly melds fantasy and sci-fi tropes into a richly imagined setting. Gameplay features remarkably taut FPS gunplay enhanced with seemingly magical powers. Your character grows in power alongside friends that inhabit the same public playspaces, and they join you in all manner of integrated exploits.

If the first Destiny introduced the universe, Destiny 2 is the story that begins to make meaningful changes to the

status quo. With no mention of a nebulous Darkness to be found, we instead have a game all about Light, a power that sets humanity apart and represents concepts of hope, self-sacrifice, and resilience. That focus on Light and its meaning lends an optimistic tone to the plot. In the wake of a devastating opening in which The Last City is brought to ruin, the Guardians are scattered, and power lost. The dramatic setup leads to a coherent and straightforward tale that spans the solar system, and culminates in several stellar set piece confrontations, including a thoughtfully concocted central villain. Individual missions are varied and smartly paced, and I love that we get some more insight into the minds of our supporting cast.

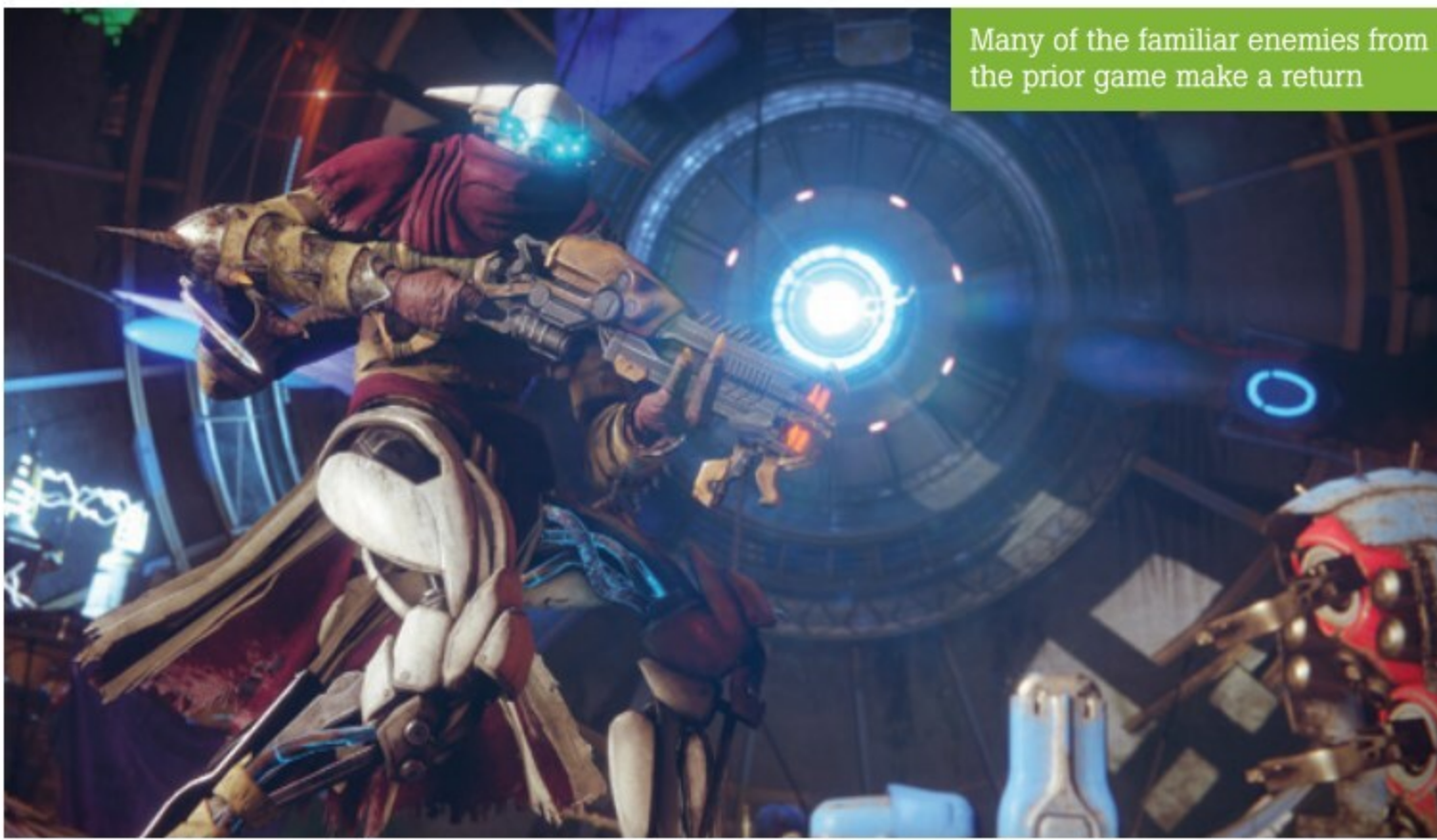
I relished the adventure, but some of the magic and mystery I've come to expect is absent. Some of the most troublesome and cryptic story elements from the earlier game also made its universe feel bigger and stranger, and I'm not sure Bungie has managed to replace characters like the Awoken Queen, or design concepts like the Dead Ghost-fueled Grimoire, with equally curious alternatives. Most enemy types return from the first Destiny with only minor alteration, diminishing the disquiet of facing a new threat.

I'm also mystified by the decision to lock so much of the story content away after its conclusion, replayable only in prescribed chunks a few times each week. The inability to relive favorite

moments outweighs the gains in simplifying the map with fewer icons. Likewise, I'm stymied by the absence of an option to select individual strikes, and their inclusion only as part of a playlist. These excellent small-team cooperative expeditions are great fun, but seem almost relegated to an afterthought following the campaign.

Breathtaking environment art and design maintain at least some of the story mystique I was looking for, accompanied by a dizzying and inspiring orchestral soundtrack. Every one of the major sites visited in Destiny 2 is majestic, beautiful, and vast, from a European forest overrun by alien conquerors to a grand underwater city hiding beneath the methane waves on one of Saturn's moons. Bungie creates compelling and intimate battlefields, but also communicates the grandeur of massive, daunting backdrops.

The first Destiny offered large open planetary destinations with little narrative context. The biggest change to gameplay is a welcome reorganization of those destinations into compelling spaces for exploration, punctuated by clearly marked sites for blistering battles beside other players. Mini-dungeons called lost sectors provide a sense of discovery. Public events are easy to find, and even feature fun heroic variants for those in the know. And a bevy of excellent new story quests and adventures extend the narrative potential post-campaign, revealing the story of these locations and their characters.



Crucible play has been overhauled in substantial ways, and moment-to-moment combat feels more competitive. Teamwork is highly valued in every mode, and encounters take a split-second longer to conclude, with fewer one-shot kill options on the table. I quite like the change, which adds up to more strategic and thoughtful engagements.

From the new and intense Countdown game type to returning modes like Control, every Crucible match type demands players move and play in different ways. Yet again, I'm perplexed by the decision to force players into one of two playlists, quick-play or competitive, rather than let them choose their preferred mode. I'm also torn by the move to exclusively four-person teams in PvP; the compact group size demands everyone pull their weight, which is great. But neither three-person strike teams or six-person raid groups can easily transition into competitive play, a symmetry that was ideal in the prior game.

If most of Destiny 2 caters to accessibility and ease of play, the new Leviathan raid offers a potent counterpoint. The most challenging cooperative activity is a mechanics-heavy beast of an expedition in which constant communication is necessary, and nearly flawless play is required. The sprawling pleasure palace is one of Bungie's most intricate and fascinating environments to date, accentuated by a maze of secret passages and hidden chests beyond the main encounters. My biggest issue is with the new reward system, which separates the excitement of new gear from the moment of victory, and doesn't offer most loot until a full completion. Without the ability to gather much new gear as you progress through, there are few ways to gear up for the next battle.

Your choice of Hunter, Titan, or Warlock class shapes the experience, whether exploring as a lone wolf along a moon of Jupiter, grouping up for challenging cooperative challenges like the briskly paced new Nightfall strikes, or trying to hold ground in the

Crucible. All classes play well and offer their own avenues to mastery. The reliance on mostly returning subclasses within each of the three is a tad disappointing, but each has been tweaked in purposeful ways. Add in a new and aggressive subclass for each, from the aerial superiority of the Dawnblade to the melee-oriented Arcstrider, and you have several thrilling playstyles to explore. Each subclass features two pre-optimized paths. Yet again, it's a design choice that puts even new players on equal footing with returning players, but the more limited customization options sting.

Progression is smooth from opening to endgame, thanks to an elementary milestone system that always suggests meaningful content to confront, and an in-game map that is easily navigable. A new clan system makes friend groups more important, and offers substantial rewards, even if they also create some danger of insular bubbling with players you already know.

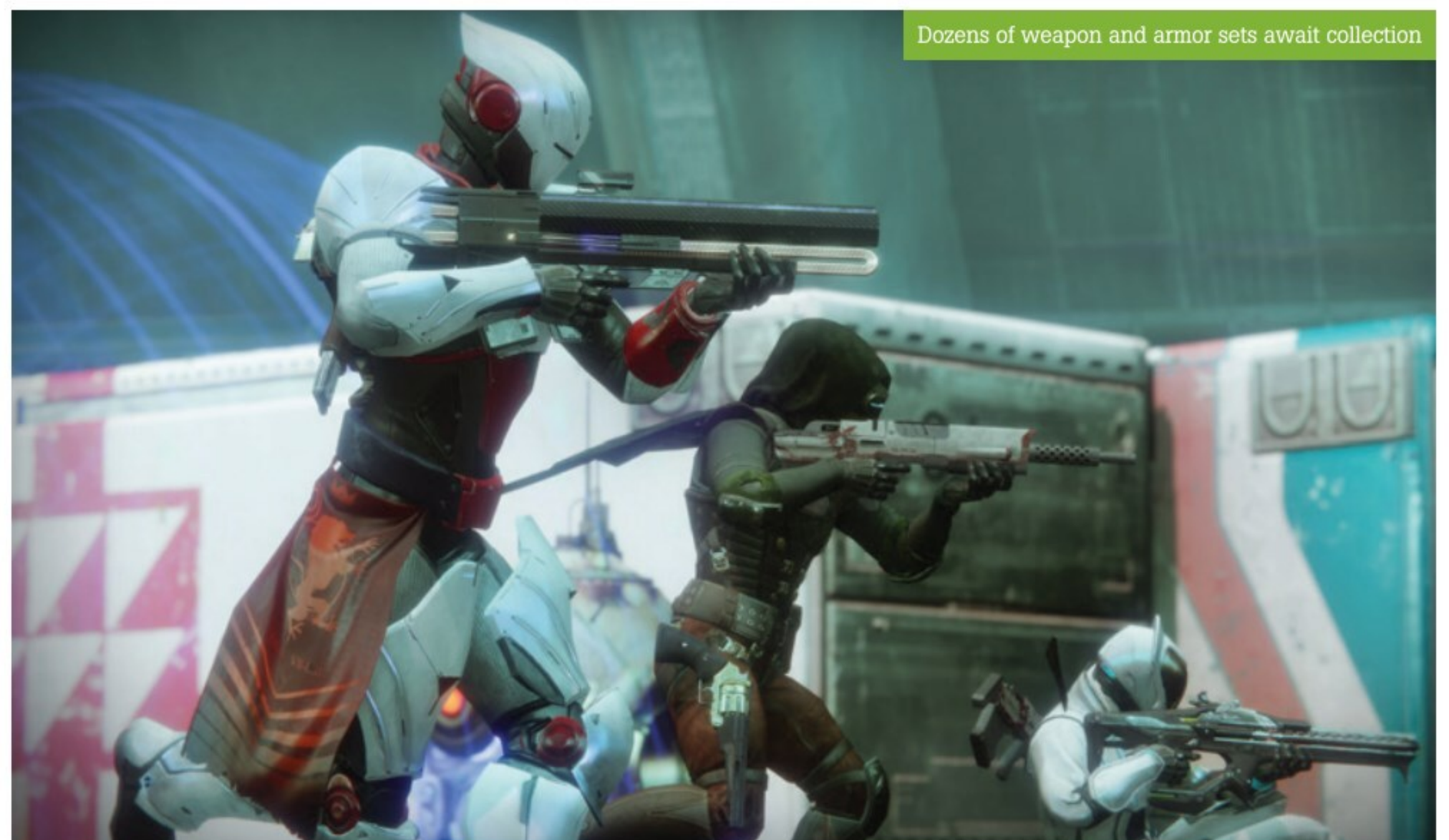
No matter the preferred style of play, collectors are in for a treat. New exotic weapons and armor are joined by welcome revisions of old favorites, and everything from legendary gear to

emblems are a lot of fun to gather. Gear comes fully powered now, so you're free to play with the gun or helmet you like, rather than waiting to power it up. Even so, I'm bummed that most items have so few customization options, as I have fond memories of tweaking those as I played in the original Destiny. Vault and inventory management have seen only minor changes, and even in these early days the management chores aren't much fun.

While I love all the collections, the cosmetic customization system has taken a hit, offloading and embedding many of the coolest ships, shaders, and other visual trappings within the microtransaction system alongside a slow-paced alternative to earn the same packages through play. Being able to apply shaders to weapons and vehicles is a great addition, but the system discourages experimentation, since shaders are consumed on use. A rich equipment modding system is also sadly looped in with the microtransactions, diminishing an otherwise compelling power customization tool.

A veteran player of any game is likely to home in on criticisms, and there's a danger of getting lost in the weeds, which would be a mistake. Destiny 2 is a massive and rewarding game that offers the potential for hundreds of hours of fun and discovery with friends. Quibbles aside, Bungie has crafted a fantastic follow-up to a wildly popular formula, and one that no other developer has come close to equaling in sophistication. Many of the streamlining choices welcome a new crop of Guardians into the mix, but also make this new game more playable and understandable for even returning players. As I settle in for what I hope to be another several years of adventures, I hope Bungie can nail the elusive balance between depth and accessibility.

» **Matt Miller**



Marvel Vs. Capcom: Infinite

Battle of the brands

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

The Marvel universe blends with several of Capcom's biggest franchises, and everyone's eager for a fight

» Graphics

I prefer the cel-shaded design from previous entries, but the character models and environments are crisp and clean. These super-powered giants still put on an impressive visual show

» Sound

The soundtrack is largely forgettable, but the voice acting is solid and occasionally amusing

» Playability

A simplified control scheme makes it easier to play with a normal controller and pull off insane combos

» Entertainment

These high-flying brawls deliver on the spectacle and the action has a great flow, but the main story mode leaves a lot to be desired

» Replay Value

High



Video games and comic books are bursting with larger-than-life characters. These fictional heroes are so dynamic that most fans dream about the epic throwdowns that might ensue if these titans ever meet. Games like Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite brilliantly tap into that geeky dream. Though Infinite's fictional mash-ups are a bit hackneyed, watching your favorite heroes smack each other around a room is a thrill.

Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite's roster of characters has a little something for everyone. Icons like Captain America, Spider-Man, and Ryu are big draws, but lesser known characters like Nova and Mike Haggar round out the cast and provide a nice balance of technical fighters, heavy grapplers, and projectile experts. I had fun experimenting with series newcomers like Mega Man X

and Captain Marvel, who easily hold their own against longtime favorites. Obviously, including everyone's favorite character in a game like this is impossible, but the hole in the roster where the X-Men once sat is evident, and I never got used to not having them around.

As a Marvel fan, I gravitated towards the story mode, which is a fine tour through the characters, but doesn't offer a lot of meat. The narrative does a good job pulling characters from both sides of the fence together for a race to collect the Infinity Gems. The story is largely filler, but features a few fun bits of fan service, like watching Ryu coach the Hulk through meditating on his emotions or seeing Tony Stark and Dr. Light nerd out about science. I also enjoyed seeing how the Marvel Universe meshes Capcom's properties. For example, A.I.M. and Umbrella get combined into one mega dorky corporation, called A.I.M.Brella. Unfortunately, these amusing moments are few and far between, and most of the narrative is filled with tired quips and lots of grandstanding.

The action helps pull the story mode along since every battle features its own mission objective. You might have to defeat a dozen Ultron drones in one mission, and hold out against one overpowered enemy with regenerating health in another. These modified win conditions help keep the battles interesting during an otherwise forgettable narrative.

In the end, Infinite's basic fighting mechanics absolve many of its sins. Newcomers will feel right at home

thanks to a streamlined fighting system. The new automatic combos and simplified super attacks allow you to easily pull off a series of flashy moves and participate in spectacular aerial battles without mastering all the ins-and-outs. Each Infinity Gem also has its own unique ability, allowing you to unleash an explosive projectile or dash across the screen with the press of a button. At the same time, hardcore fighting fans will find a great deal of flexibility to the combo system, since you can swap between characters multiple times during a combo. I loved experimenting with new ways to juggle between my heroes as I created massive attack strings that depleted half my opponent's health.

Players who really want to test their skills will want to jump online and participate in a series of casual or ranked matches. The online features are pretty no-frills, but matchmaking works well and I experienced almost no lag during online matches, though I was playing on pre-release servers.

Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite is a fighting game that tries to appeal to everyone, and it largely succeeds (unless you're a die-hard Wolverine fan). I occasionally cringed at the bad one-liners, but I also giggled with absurd joy every time photojournalist Frank West tossed a demigod like Thanos across a dilapidated space station. Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite isn't trying to be taken seriously; it's a series of geeky what-if scenarios that play out in spectacular aerial battles. After I embraced that, I had a lot of fun. » **Ben Reeves**



The roster has a little something for everyone, but the lack of X-Men characters is noticeable and disappointing

Danganronpa V3: Killing Harmony

Taking a semester off

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** NIS America **Developer** Spike Chunsoft **Release** September 26 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Vita • PC

Danganronpa has always hinged on surprises, including deviously intricate murders and elaborate twists. Who is the killer? Who is the next victim? Who is pulling the strings? Uncovering the answers to these questions while watching high-school students deal with the drama is the core appeal of this visual-novel series. Danganronpa V3 taps into the same vein, but the flow is weaker and more dilute this time. After two installments full of rising stakes and escalating expectations, Danganronpa fans are savvy; in its attempts to surprise players, this entry occasionally performs strained storytelling gymnastics that make the pivotal moments feel more arbitrary than satisfying.

Because so much of the experience is about the unfolding narrative, I can't be specific without ruining major developments. But in a general sense, the premise in Danganronpa V3 hasn't changed much: A group of exceptionally talented students are trapped in a school and forced to play a killing game according to strict rules set out by Monokuma, a demented mechanical bear. Suspicions abound as you explore the areas and converse with your classmates. Once a murder happens, you uncover clues that gradually paint a picture of the crime and its perpetrator. You expose the culprit during a class trial, and after a grim execution, daily life resumes until the next killing.

I still enjoy the basic structure, since the cases provide a sense of resolution while you ponder the larger mysteries. However, the individual scenarios in V3 are my least favorite in the series.

While the chapters have a fair share of entertaining moments, several of the payoffs are flaccid. Identifying the killers in the first two Danganronpa games were thrilling "gotcha" moments, but V3 is more uneven – even going in with a healthy suspension of disbelief. Gaps in logic and unclear motivations drain the righteous justice from big reveals; though the development team succeeds in making the culminations unpredictable, the surprises come more out of left field than from clues fitting together. I was also majorly disappointed by the grand finale – a highlight of previous entries – but to say anything more would reveal too much.

Despite my complaints about the plot, the cast of characters participating in the events is entertaining. I liked getting to know them more than the cast of the previous game, with only a few duds among the 16 students (particularly the ultimate inventor, whose vulgar dialogue tries too hard to be shocking). When you have free time to spend, your interactions take on a thrilling degree of urgency, since you never know if your favorite characters will survive the coming day. I especially liked my conversations with the ultimate maid and the ultimate supreme leader. Yes, the well of "ultimate" talents is running dry, as evidenced by bizarre specialties like ultimate entomologist and ultimate robot. But even if their primary talents are weird, the characters' backstories and growth are compelling.

An all-new cast means you can jump in and enjoy most of the story without playing previous Danganronpa titles; it's largely a standalone experience,

though knowledge of past characters and events enriches various sequences. On the other hand, considering how few changes the series has undergone over time, I can't imagine why anyone would start with this installment. Apart from a different selection of reliably terrible minigames that interrupt the class trials (a consistent crack in the series' foundation), no groundbreaking advances have been made, so you may as well start at the beginning and get the full experience.

The one thing that V3 does better than its predecessors is post-game content. After completing the main story, you can access new modes to prolong your time in the universe. One is framed as a dating-reality show that lets you continue building relationships with characters, filling in the gaps you left during your playthrough. However, the most interesting way to keep playing is two connected modes that have you building characters via a board game, then building a party with those characters in a separate dungeon-dive inspired by old-school RPGs like Dragon Quest. Though not exceptionally deep, these two linked modes feature the cast from the entire Danganronpa series, offering a breezy-but-fun treat for fans like me.

The mysteries of Danganronpa V3 may not offer the same rewarding highs as previous entries, but the core formula remains entertaining despite some missteps. I still had fun piecing together the murders and learning about the characters, which is enough to help V3 earn its passing grade, though it isn't graduating with honors. » **Joe Juba**

» Concept

A group of high-school students murder each other as part of a twisted game, and you need to find the culprits to save your own life

» Graphics

Character portraits are crisp and colorful, though the school facilities aren't particularly detailed or interesting

» Sound

The voice performances are hit-and-miss, but the soundtrack is great at creating an idyllic atmosphere and punctuating dramatic moments

» Playability

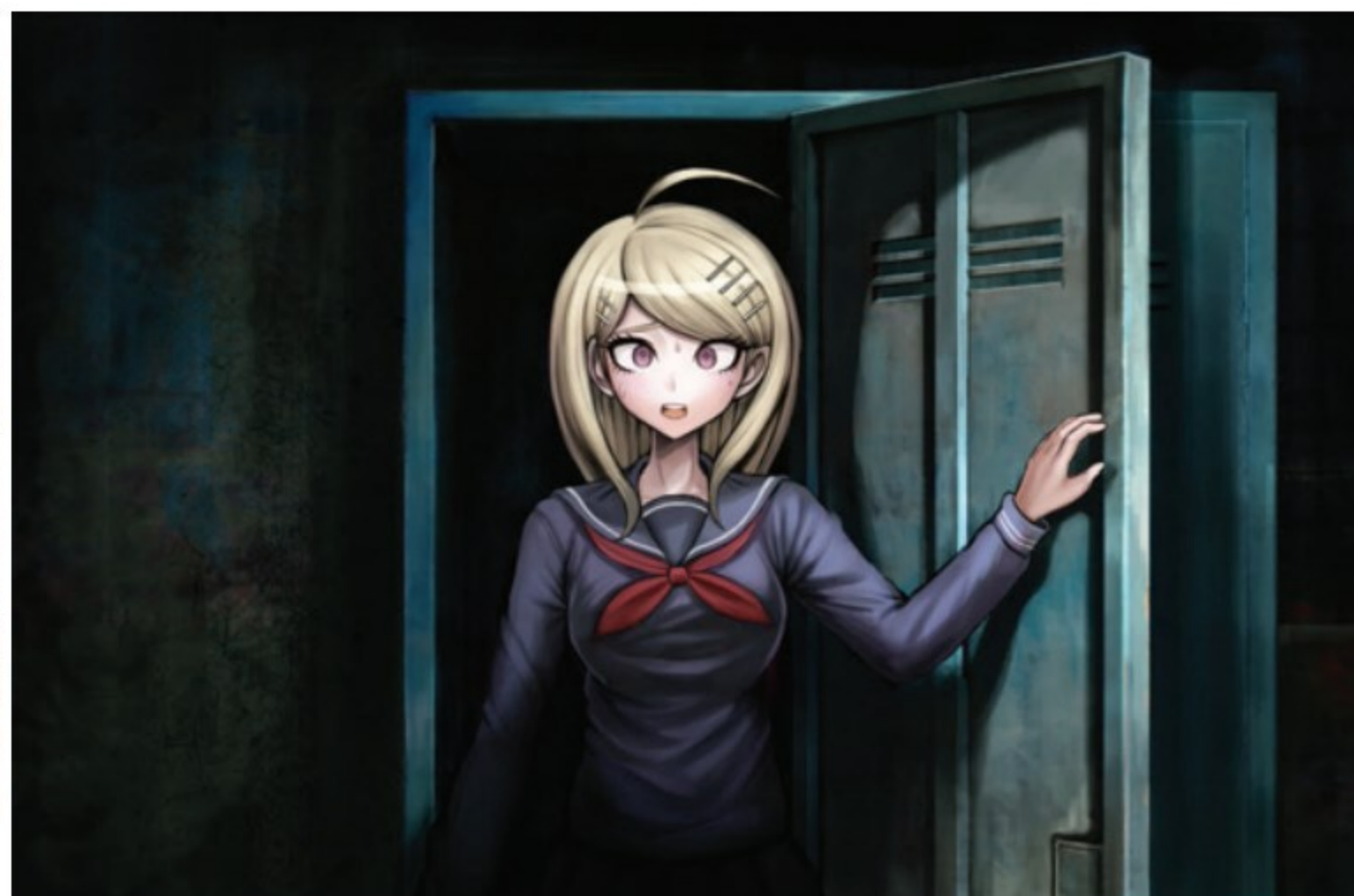
As always, the minigames are functional at best. More often, they are clunky and interrupt the narrative pacing

» Entertainment

Even with new characters in a new setting, Monokuma's killing game feels familiar and doesn't deliver on the payoffs

» Replay Value

Moderate



Divinity: Original Sin II

A godly ascension

9.75

PC

» Concept

Experience a fantasy trek through dungeons and monsters, driven by choice and freedom

» Graphics

Graphics are rarely a highlight in isometric titles, but they are crisp and convey environments and encounters well

» Sound

An absolutely stirring score that highlights precipitous battles and deadly dungeon crawls.

A fully voiced cast of characters enhances the experience

» Playability

The sheer open-ended nature of the gameplay is overwhelming at first, and it takes significant time to understand the systems at work

» Entertainment

A majestic offering that stands tall among the greatest PC RPGs of all time

» Replay Value

High

gameinformer
OF THE
MONTH

gameinformer
PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Larian Studios
Developer Larian Studios Release September 14 Rating NR

Divinity: Original Sin was a breakout title for Larian Studios, showing it had some truly great ideas and concepts for redefining the modern RPG. Divinity: Original Sin II improves upon every aspect of the original title and delivers a classic fantasy tale alongside unparalleled customization and impactful player choice.

Anything goes in Divinity: Original Sin II, and most situations have multiple solutions, where choices echo throughout an entire playthrough and have real meaning – not just picking good or bad options on a dialogue wheel. Characters may leave your party based on your decisions at critical junctures, and quests ripple between acts – even changing the final encounter and the ending.

From romance to rivalry, almost every character you meet has a story that effects the game in interesting ways. These range from minor missions like sparing an enemy soldier, joining forces with demonic evil for the greater good, or the gravity of willingly unleashing death on an entire city. Divinity: Original Sin II challenges you to forget everything you know about games that often have a singular solution and the illusion of choices that always end the same way.

Whether your approach to discovering the secrets of the gods is with a truncheon, a silver tongue, stealth and guile, or the mysteries of magic, the world is constantly testing and responding to your touch. Talk to animals. Murder people. Steal everything. Teleport across impassable territory.

Convince potential foes to join you. Pick the door's lock, smash it down, discover a hidden tunnel, or use the secret password. Tear the lids off ancient sarcophagi with your insane strength. Have tea with a noted historian with your scholarly intellect. Or play the traditional hero. It's all up to you. While this degree of freedom can be overwhelming at first, it quickly leads to mild euphoria as you realize you're free to interact with the people, places, and problems any way you wish. Little can compare to coming up with your own solution to the hundreds of decisions you face. It is a testament to Larian's talents that you can try to break the game in so many ways with the tools they present to you and it doesn't break down.

While a few threads of humor shine through with cute talking crabs and happy dogs, the tale is dark without going too edgy – a vast improvement over the constant comedy call-outs of the first title. I'm rarely captivated by video game fantasy tales, but the overarching yarn of discovering your divine powers and ascending to divinity is supported immaculately by a never-ending slew of sidequests that aren't second fiddle to the main show. Digging into the secrets of a tranquil rainy cemetery and its slightly menacing manor took me hours. That diversion isn't required to complete the game, but I enjoyed every minute of it – and later, my dealings with the manor host came to impact other relationships. Each branching road is replete with fascinating characters and opportunities, and I wanted to explore every secret

passage, out-of-the-way farmhouse, and decaying crypt.

Combat is turn-based and driven by action points. For instance, it may cost two action points to swing a sword, three to move to a certain point on the battlefield, or one to quaff a potion hastily in the middle of battle. It is refreshing compared to the "real-time with pause" systems favored by modern RPGs paying respect to the past, and it's all about elemental interactions here. Lay down some lightning on a pool of water for some shocking stuns, fire some poison on top of fire for explosive results, or call upon the rain to douse the roaring blaze. Want to set up a theft fest? Get some steam going to block visibility and pickpocket to your heart's content.

While this fantasy gem is almost flawless, some meddlesome quirks are drilled into the framework with random character freezes, running through closed doors, puzzle pieces not operating properly, and quests not completing. These bugs are frustrating, but if you're saving often anyway they should be mostly painless. I didn't run into anything that stopped me from enjoying the game.

Divinity: Original Sin II is one of the greatest PC RPGs of all time, and Larian's continued dedication to creating incredible freeform adventures inspired by tabletop lineage is inspiring and commendable. A few bugs and frustrating encounters are small prices to pay for a lavish ensemble of the genre's best and a one-of-a-kind experience. » **Daniel Tack**





Dishonored: Death Of The Outsider

A fine finish



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Arkane Studios **Release** September 15 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

In 2012, Arkane Studios introduced the world to the city of Dunwall.

For five years and across multiple entries, Arkane has built its fantastical universe around assassins and vigilantes, people sick of corrupt politicians molding the world in their image and willing to do anything to stop them – even making deals with the devil. In the world of Dishonored, the closest thing to the devil is The Outsider, a mysterious figure on the outskirts of reality who grants those he deems worthy supernatural powers.

While Death Of The Outsider isn't the strongest Dishonored, this standalone expansion does justice by its enigmatic character and serves as a strong finale for a series that's mined the depths of revenge, justice, and the absurdity of existence for all of its combined worth. You play Billie Lurk, Daud's pupil and a returning character. Lurk finally reunites with Daud after years of separation and her former teacher presents her with

one last job: to kill the Outsider.

This entry replaces the abilities from Dishonored 2 by giving Lurk a unique skill set of her own. Displace lets you teleport, like Blink, but it's switch-oriented instead of instantaneous. So you can place a marker in a safe spot, run into a zone filled with enemies, kill a few of them, and then zap back to the marker before you're overwhelmed. Semblance allows you to literally steal your enemies' faces and walk around as them, passing through checkpoints.

Dishonored has always been about giving players a variety of skills and abilities to accomplish their objectives and then letting them go hog wild. Death of the Outsider is the strongest version of that series concept thanks to two important tweaks. While previous games required you to find or buy potions to recharge your mana, Lurk's power currency is constantly recharging so that you can use your abilities as much as you want. The

chaos system, which determined what ending you would get in previous games, is gone. You can kill as many people as you want and suffer no narrative consequences.

The biggest strike against the expansion is while its levels are fun and open-ended, none of them are particularly memorable enough on their own. I had fun pulling off a heist with minimal casualties and navigating The Void, but there is no level that comes to matching the enigmatic wonders of Jindosh's Clockwork Mansion.

The storytelling also occasionally leaves something to be desired. For example, The Outsider himself has a habit of showing up and giving Lurk special powers or presenting her with dull philosophy 101 questions about people and the choices they make. The scenes annoyed me as they felt like they existed to strike a wobbly balance between fan service and pushing the plot forward at breakneck speed. Luckily, everything comes together in the end in a predictable but satisfying way, making these occasional weak points bumps in the road on a journey worth taking.

Death of the Outsider emerges as a strong chapter in one of the best modern action/RPG series thanks to gameplay refinements and dedication to its dark fiction. This entry doesn't revolutionize the series, but instead does something more important, navigating the familiar to bring everything to a satisfying conclusion.

» Javy Gwaltney

» Concept

Take on the god of The Void and bring the chaos he inflicts upon Dunwall and Karnaca to an end

» Graphics

Like Dishonored 2, Death of The Outsider is grimly gorgeous with its character designs and architecture

» Sound

A low-key orchestra soundtrack is faintly noticeable and mostly functional but there are some nice tracks

» Playability

The variety of tools you're given to accomplish your goals creates an accessible and fun, if challenging, adventure

» Entertainment

Death Of The Outsider is a great standalone expansion that delivers the enthralling open-ended gameplay Dishonored fans have come to expect

» Replay Value

High





Life Is Strange: Before The Storm—Awake

Facing reality

8

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Square Enix Developer Deck Nine Release August 31 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**

Chloe deals with her father's death and finds comfort in a new friend in this prequel

» **Graphics**

Characters' awkward animations break the immersion, but detailed items in the environment pick up the slack in creating the ambiance

» **Sound**

Music is still a focus, and every enjoyable song sets the scene. The voice acting is decent, but Chloe's new voice actress is still warming up to her role, with some deliveries better than others

» **Playability**

Easy to pick up and play, but some obscured objects require a thorough eye. Replaying scenes, I often found things I missed

» **Entertainment**

Awake is at its best when it focuses on Chloe and Rachel's complicated lives, making you feel each character's struggle

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Life is a series of struggles we can't avoid. The original *Life is Strange* explored the concept of rewinding time to ease conflict and create different outcomes, but *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* is focused on reality. In this prequel, you have no special powers. You are forced to face life head-on and confront its painful plights. New developer Deck Nine uses *Awake*, the first of three planned episodes, to emphasize choices and emotional turmoil. *Awake* retains the essence of *Life is Strange* (with plenty of callbacks to the original), but now you play from the perspective of Chloe and see her budding friendship with Rachel Amber. The result is an episode that pulls at the heart strings despite some stumbles.

Before the Storm takes place three years before she reconnects with Max and two years after the death of her father, and she's still grieving. Her depression has taken a toll, causing her to rebel and not care much about anything or anyone. Playing as a younger Chloe is a nice change of pace, as she isn't completely the confident free-spirit she was in the original. She's still figuring herself out, and has more naiveté and vulnerability that makes her more sympathetic. Rachel Amber is on the opposite end of the spectrum; she's popular, gets good grades, and has a financially stable family. The pair meet at a concert and embark on a complicated friendship, as they're both facing their own trials.

This episode is a slow burn, gradually introducing you to Chloe's world. You travel to familiar places like Blackwell Academy, and to new locales like a punk club. One of my favorite aspects is seeing Blackwell students from the original game, like Victoria Chase to Nathan Prescott. However, you see younger versions that foreshadow their future. Victoria is still a stuck-up brat,

but you start to see the beginnings of her concern for Nathan, while watching Nathan deal with his own difficulties from his father's influence.

This episode also sets up Chloe's conflict with her mom and new boyfriend David well, providing insight into why Chloe's so angry and distraught. It also doesn't forget to show the impact Max had on her life, which was the focal point of the original game. Max is mentioned a lot to show Chloe's hurt that she moved away, and isn't there to help her through the hardest time of her life.

Even with several parts that feel genuine, Chloe and Rachel Amber form their friendship at unnatural speed. They've only known each other for a day, so their interactions can feel forced. In their second time hanging out, you can already decide if you want to tell Rachel Amber if you want to be more than friends. That being said, they have some fun bonding moments, such as playing games like *Two Truths and a Lie* and observing people and making up stories about their lives. The most authentic part of *Awake* is how Chloe mourns the loss of her dad (dream sequences heighten this), and Rachel Amber's reaction to finding out some disturbing news about her father. Both girls are recognizing harsh realities together, and I felt for both of them in their anger and sadness.

Without the rewind feature, you're mostly exploring and making choices. The change makes sense for the story, and I didn't mind it. Dialogue plays a larger role, and Deck Nine does a good job creating interesting interactions, such as Chloe playing *D&D* and allowing you to pick her moves and responses. The only new aspect that didn't entirely jive with me is Chloe's backtalk option. During certain conversations, you can talk your way out of things by being brazen. You need

to pick a string of "correct" dialogue options that relate to what the person just said and goes with the tone of the conversation. Mostly, this is Chloe throwing insults and threatening people, including talking back to her principal to get out of an after-school visit and convincing a bouncer she's tough enough to enter a shady music venue. Sometimes Chloe's insults are so over-the-top, I didn't believe she could have gotten away with talking to any human like that. When it beats you over the head with Chloe's rebellious side, *Awake* feels disingenuous.

As you explore, interacting with certain items can open up dialogue options, and Chloe can tag special places with graffiti akin to Max taking extra photos in the first game. Some areas also have obstacles that you must get past, like finding a way to steal wine or getting a jammed quarter out of a machine. These sequences never go on too long, and I enjoyed the focus on the story and characters. As this is the first episode, I can't say for sure how far-reaching the choices are, but you do have plenty of decisions, including how you treat other characters, whether to steal money, and even what clothes Chloe wears, which characters notice. I wish this episode had a few tougher choices, but hopefully future episodes have more agonizing ones with satisfying payoffs.

Awake shows you a broken Chloe—someone at her lowest. Everyone hits those trying times in their lives, and what *Awake* does best is illustrate how much another person can make a difference in those situations. The emotional pull is strong, and the story's strength is its relatability. This first episode has me intrigued at how Chloe and Rachel Amber will make it through their distress, and it also has me rooting for them. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Ys VIII: Lacrimosa Of Dana

An adventurer's delight

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher NIS America Developer Nihon Falcom Release September 12 Rating T

8.25

PS4 • Vita • PC

» Concept

Explore a mysterious island, uncover its mysteries, and live to tell the tale

» Graphics

The visuals aren't a strong suit, but the vibrant locales add some flavor to the world

» Sound

With killer rock beats and emotional orchestral tracks, the music enhances every situation and is a highlight. The voice acting is adequate, but isn't memorable

» Playability

Ys VIII has a steady learning curve, never making anything too complicated. However, later boss battles were much more of a challenge for me, with their demand for twitch skills

» Entertainment

Between building up your base, making new discoveries, and fighting intense boss battles, Ys VIII is a hard adventure to put down

» Replay Value

Moderate

The Ys series has always captured the heart and soul of an adventurer. Throughout its nearly 30-year run, developer Nihon Falcom has complemented fun exploration with adrenaline-pumping boss battles, all starring its iconic red-headed protagonist Adol Christin. Ys VIII stays true to the franchise's core values, but those elements play off each other wonderfully, creating an engaging gameplay loop that had me glued to the game for hours on end.

Ys VIII puts exploration front and center. After a vicious monster attacks a ship transporting Adol and various others, they end up stranded on a deserted island overrun with strange creatures. To survive, Adol must gather resources, build up a base, and find a way off the island. During his journey, he can recruit fellow passengers to jobs on the base, such as a blacksmith, tailor, and gardener. Watching your headquarters grow is exciting, and it was one of my favorite parts of the experience. I loved venturing off to explore more of the island, then coming back with new materials to craft better things.

The vibrant island also has mysteries to uncover, taking you to deserted pirate ships and ancient towers. Some sections of the vast landscape are blocked off until you recruit more members or obtain certain gear; special gloves let you climb vines to reach new areas, while another item allows you to breathe underwater. I enjoyed revisiting areas to obtain treasure I couldn't get before, and unlocking the new abilities for Adol keeps gameplay fresh and fun. Climbing vines adds some verticality to the experience, and battling creatures underwater is slower and methodical, making you anticipate where your opponent is going to be rather than striking where they are.

Narrative beats slowly unravel as you progress. At first, your goal is merely to figure out a way off the island, but then the focus turns to discovering why all the beasts are roaming around it. The answer is more interesting than I expected, but the plot tends to drag with awkward dialogue and boring, long-winded sequences. The latter especially hits when you play as Dana, a mysterious girl Adol is connected to through his dreams. These perspective shifts often have you backtracking, and feature some of the most lackluster dialogue in the game, as conversations



feel more like filler than interesting revelations about Dana's world.

Part of the story also revolves around building bonds with the strangers you meet. You can get to know your fellow castaways better by completing quests and giving them gifts, which often nets you new items and improves their support skills in battle. Ys games aren't traditionally built on strong characters or story, and while Ys VIII is an improvement, these areas remain weak. That being said, I appreciated the little bonding moments and having characters with more personality, like a sassy noble to a lighthearted fisherman who add some levity to the journey.

Outside of exploration, Ys VIII's bread and butter is its stellar action combat, which is fast and smooth. Specific weapons are stronger against certain creature types; selecting the right one is essential for bringing down foes. For instance, pierce weapons are strong against flying enemies, while slash ones are superior against soft-bodied creatures. At any point, you can swap to a character in your three-member party to take advantage of this. All combatants have different fighting styles, from slower powerhouse tanks to quick-jab fencers, which adds variety to fights.

You also have skills and special moves to unleash, but the focus on the dodge and block mechanics is the shining star of combat. If you dodge at the right time, you can unlock a flash move, which makes you invincible for a short time and slows everything down. This is key for creating openings to get the edge on enemies. Similarly, if you guard right as an enemy strikes, you unleash a flash guard, where all attacks briefly become critical hits and all damage is nullified.

My most satisfying moments were when I pulled off both a flash move

and flash guard in succession to wreak havoc on bosses. These big battles don't disappoint, as you go up against larger-than-life enemies and live to tell the tale. Every boss has weak points to target, so part of the fun is finding the right area to hit and recognizing their patterns. The bosses are a highlight for me, as they force you to pull out all stops and really showcase the battle system coming together at its best. Dodging, jumping, and using your skills at opportune moments are key, and taking down these large enemies is an adrenaline rush.

Ys VIII gets its hooks in you with its progression loop; you're always making new discoveries and locating new materials to craft something better. Nihon Falcom also does its best to inject variety when it can, from battles that involve your entire village to Dana learning different fighting styles throughout the game. With a wealth of content to pursue, you always have something to do, even if it's merely fishing or cooking. On top that, Ys VIII has a lot of memorable battle moments; I only wish the story and characters held the same allure. » **Kimberley Wallace**



FIFA 18

Alex Hunter makes his mark again

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Tell the second installment of Alex Hunter's story and roll on with more single-player challenges for the FUTheads

» Graphics

The series' TV-style presentation remains top-notch, and the Frostbite engine makes everything look excellent

» Sound

Your managers and many of your teammates remain mute in story mode, which is conspicuous for the second year running

» Playability

The odd pass doesn't go where you think, and I also noticed a variety of legacy issues. That said, players feel good simply running and dribbling with the left analog stick

» Entertainment

Seeing where Hunter's story goes is a compelling part of a game that otherwise feels very familiar

» Replay Value

High



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release September 29 Rating E

Alex Hunter's adventures as an up-and-coming player in the glamorous world of football continue in the Hunter Returns story mode, and while the game adds little touches to its other modes, this is FIFA 18's major piece of business in the offseason transfer window.

The story of Alex Hunter contains new choices, takes him across the globe, and introduces new characters, but its basic structure is the same. The mode is now broken up into chapters, but you still play lots of games, practice, and work your way up the skill tree. These things are not inherently bad, but the routine would be more enjoyable if its basic mechanics culminated in a more interesting destination. The match performance grading dings you for actions it shouldn't, and the menu feedback can be contradictory. Meanwhile, practicing to be in the starting lineup and having to spend points on skills you don't want (due to the restrictive skill tree) isn't an exciting backbone for the mode when you'd just rather get to the next turn in the story. All this is especially true when it feels like playing with Hunter is like starting back at square one where you struggle to put the ball on net, and a big part of the upgrade infrastructure only leads to cosmetic customization.

These flaws are tolerable because the tale itself – which ventures into serious subjects without binging on drama or hamming it up – is once again a success. I won't go into any spoilers, but family and the business of football are presented and executed believably. The inclusion of playable characters other than Hunter is smart because they not only help the pacing of the story, but they add depth to the characters involved. The script, voice actors, and Frostbite-generated graphics again deliver a great experience. As well-executed as the story is, the mode still could use some league and fan flavor. I was at a huge, global club at one point, and it didn't feel any different than if I was playing for a minnow.

Other modes don't feel as bolstered this year, despite their additions, because they don't have Hunter Returns' excellent story to provide a fresh experience. The career mode now includes transfer negotiation cutscenes (which are mute like many of Hunter Returns' characters), but this is a visual skin on the career mode's already familiar business dealings. In fact, the biggest change isn't the presence of

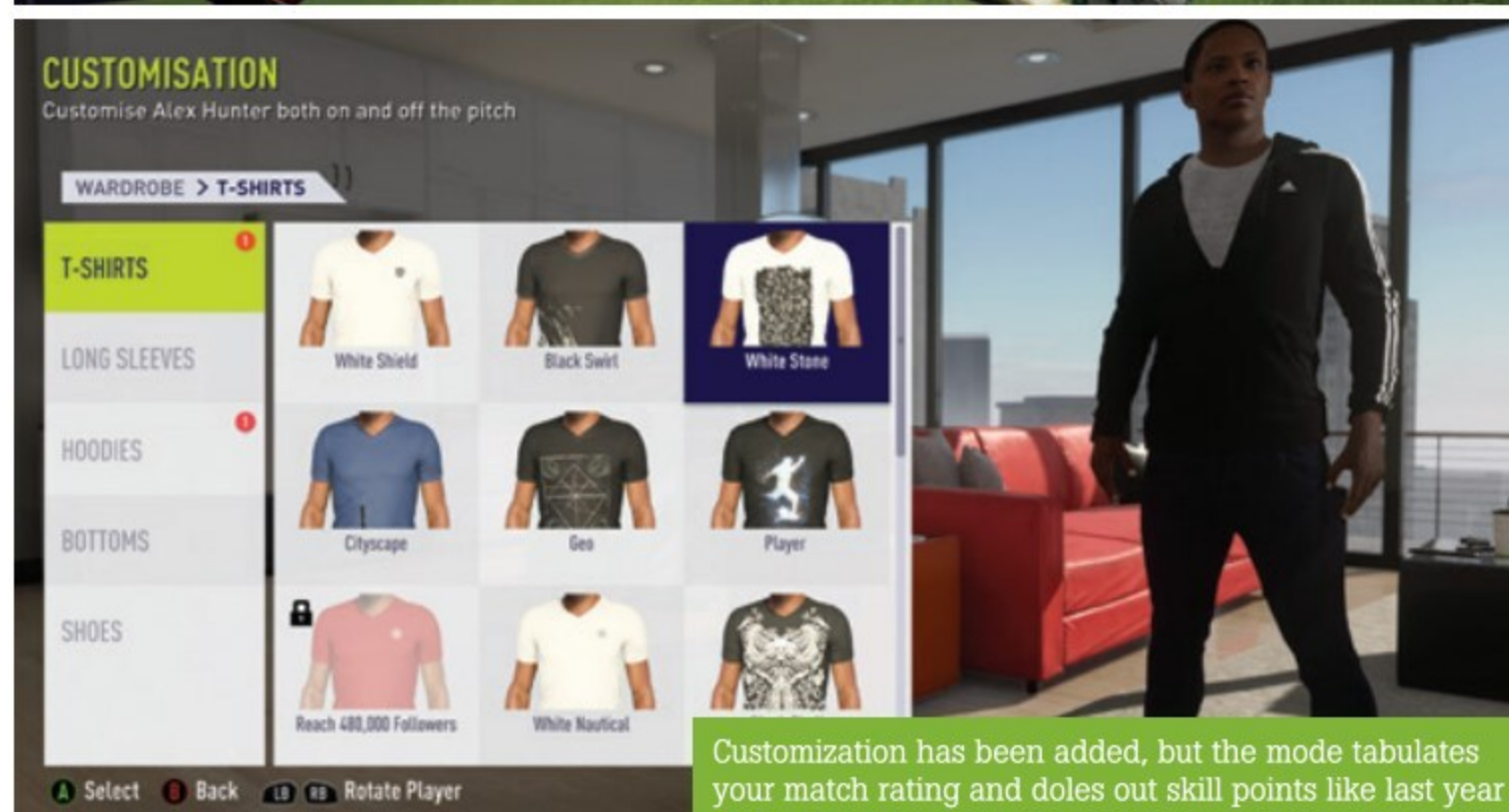
cutscenes, but that negotiations occur in a single day, a nice (if minor) quality-of-life improvement for an otherwise static mode. The transfer network still goes dark and squad fatigue isn't the concern it is in real life, but thankfully training programs can be automated so you can easily shepherd the progress of your younger players.

The Ultimate Team juggernaut rolls on with new Icon cards that chronicle famous players at different stages of their career, but whether you land one or not, I think everyone will appreciate the new Squad Battles. These single-player matches against real-life players' squads (with variable difficulty levels and rewards) are nothing special at face value, but they form a more appetizing non-PvP grind path since you control the challenge and rewards through the difficulty level. I prefer this to Madden's Solo Challenges, for instance, which can either be too easy or too specifically demanding. Ultimate Team isn't my favorite FIFA mode, but with its loan players, squad building, and various ways to grab coins, I don't worry about forming a competitive team – on paper at least.

On the pitch, FIFA 18's gameplay shows as many strides forward as it does legacy issues. I like how it feels to run and dribble with the left analog stick, with easy, minute changes of direction letting you move into open spaces. Overall, the game seems more wide open than some previous FIFAs, which more strictly governed how you moved up the pitch.

As for legacy issues, I still encountered oddly wayward passes and weak shots; predetermined ball possessions, pathing (so many posts), and detection issues; and inconsistent acceleration, among other problems. Overall, FIFA 18's gameplay is in a good place, but there are still moments where I'm anticipating how the game will translate my intent instead of just playing without thinking.

FIFA 18 shows Alex Hunter moving into a wider world of football, and while that story experience is absorbing, it also reveals how much work areas like the career mode – which hasn't meaningfully changed in years – need. It's still worth it to play all the modes the title has to offer, but this is a title that caters to its superstar. » **Matthew Kato**



Customization has been added, but the mode tabulates your match rating and doles out skill points like last year

Pro Evolution Soccer 2018

A tactical change



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) Publisher Konami Developer Konami Release September 12 Rating E

I was happy with Pro Evolution Soccer 2017's gameplay because of the way it felt and the things it allowed me to do in the game, so I was surprised when developer Konami announced that it was changing things up for 2018. I braced for disappointment, but instead I'm beyond relieved. The developer didn't just tinker with the game for the sake of slapping the word "new" on the box. They improved a vital component of the franchise without changing what was already great.

The gameplay speed is slower than 2017, allowing users to better see, feel, and control players' touches with the ball. The game is slower, but it's by no means clunky. While there are still some moments of predetermined possession, if you think you can stretch out that foot for a last-ditch volley on goal or get your foot on the ball to control it and start dribbling on the run, you can do it thanks to the still fluid movement. This sensation is even more remarkable given that the game adds a layer of physicality to the gameplay as players shield the ball and jostle for position. The result of this combination is sophistication, not ugliness. In general, PES' animations are beautiful but rarely feel contrived or cumbersome.

As highly as I rate PES 2018's gameplay, legacy issues persist. Even on higher difficulty levels, rapid one-touch passes, give-and-go passes, and through balls can break the lines perhaps too easily, and leave defenses vulnerable. Playing against the A.I., their buildups and attacks can feel the same. However, I liked having to be selective



in my defensive movements, because having to recover from a step in the wrong direction or a hesitation often makes an important difference between success and failure.

The Master League career mode also has its additions, although the mode feels less fresh than the gameplay. Small touches like release clauses, a preseason tour, and a new challenge difficulty for the mode (including transfer refusals from some players) are nice, but it still needs an overhaul. Transfer windows lack drama, with the news buried in menus and a lack of Galácticos and large transfer amounts separating the elite from the rest of the pack. I also feel the mode needs more injuries, more variety in the sim engine, and in-depth scouting and youth departments. Konami added more club and league licenses while others like Manchester United and Bayern Munich fall away, and you'll still have to deal with import files if you want many of

your teams, leagues, and competitions to look like they do in real life.

The MyClub fantasy roster mode remains largely the same, but adds 3-on-3 co-op to the play options (co-op is also available for offline play), and trying to level up and receive categorical accolades and MyClub rewards is addictive. Exhibition Random Selection matches similarly offer a different way to experience the game – even if they're one-off matches – but how this all adds up when you step back and look at the game's big picture is hard to assess.

I absolutely enjoy playing PES 2018; its gameplay elevates an aspect that was already strong. This is remarkable in and of itself, but also highlights the work still to be done in important areas such as the Master League. The franchise contains a great foundation, and will have to continue to build on it to remain at the top of the table.

» **Matthew Kato**

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

The gameplay benefits from the slowed down action, and Konami added peripheral modes such as 3-on-3 co-op and random matches

» Graphics

The crowd is noticeably composed of individual people, and they look better as they move. Player faces continue to improve and look great

» Sound

The commentary team of Jim Beglin and Peter Drury delivers an average performance that tries to impart relevant context but does not stand out

» Playability

The auto-shielding does an excellent job in various situations, requiring nothing of the user but still feeling very natural

» Entertainment

The new gameplay changes and additions mean PES continues to be a great experience. The Master League, however, needs to take a similar step forward

» Replay Value

Moderately High



NBA 2K18

Making another run

9

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (10-Player Online) Publisher 2K Sports
Developer Visual Concepts Release September 19 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept

Double down on the off-court element of NBA 2K by introducing a new social space called The Neighborhood

» Graphics

With fantastic facial captures and diverse body types, this is the best-looking sports game on the planet during on-court play. Off court, however, the quality drops with the fictitious MyCareer characters

» Sound

A diverse lineup of color commentators helps inject more personality into the stellar broadcasts, but repetition sets in early

» Playability

The new motion engine and shot mechanic strengthen NBA 2K's already strong gameplay, but I wish you had shot feedback on layups so you know why so many easy shots are being missed

» Entertainment

With a robust offering in the franchise, single-player, multiplayer, and collectible card modes, NBA 2K18 delivers hundreds of hours of fun

» Replay Value

High



Driven by fearless ambition and a willingness to push the boundaries of sports video games, Visual Concepts' NBA 2K series has arguably been the most impressive sports franchise of the last two console generations. Its commitment to world-class visuals, sophisticated gameplay, and a breadth of compelling modes make it a sales goliath year in and year out. NBA 2K18 follows in that grand tradition by further innovating on several fronts.

At first glance, not much has changed in the minute-to-minute basketball experience, but the more time you spend chucking up threes and pounding the paint, the more the subtle gameplay changes rise to the surface. Chief among them is a reworked motion system that makes it easier to blow by defenders when you're controlling an elite guard. Dribble moves still help open windows for drives to the basket, but speedy guards like Russell Westbrook can also take lesser defensemen right from the first dribble. Big men feel more powerful as well, easily backing down smaller defenders when screen switches create exploitable mismatches.

The new shot meter feedback system, which communicates how well you timed your release and how contested your shot was, is another welcome inclusion. I just wish it extended to layups as well, because my slashing guard

had an inexplicable amount of easy baskets clank off the rim.

This five-star gameplay only has a few weaknesses. It's still too easy to over-commit when guarding human players, and far too many clipping animations appear all over the court, from one-on-one situations above the key to slashing through defenders in the paint.

Over the last several years, 2K has expanded off-court activities in its popular MyCareer mode to include hangouts with NBA stars, fictitious characters, gym workouts, and the like. This year, Visual Concepts takes this progression to its inevitable conclusion with the introduction of The Neighborhood. This GTA-style urban social hub serves as the centerpiece for the entire mode. From this small city block, you can head to your NBA training facility for practice, visit the fitness center to improve your stamina, enter an arena for a Pro-Am game, or get next on the street courts of The Playground. On your way to these various activities, you can stop to shop at various apparel stores, get inked at the tattoo parlor, or even get your hair cut and shoot the breeze at the barbershop – all of which cost VC, the in-game currency you earn through performances on the court.

This hub is a strong concept, but its execution leaves much to be desired. With only a handful of NPCs on site, the people-watching is limited to other

MyPlayers, most of who are standing around like zombies on their phones. The inactivity gives The Neighborhood an unintended *28 Days Later* feel; if the streets aren't disquietingly barren, they are mildly populated with people standing around. The mode could use an injection of interesting NPCs to liven up the streets and more shortcuts for users to load into specific locations.

Most years, the MyCareer mode is driven by the NBA experience and accompanying story mode. This year, 2K loosens up the format to let you optimize your experience. The game still tells a coming-of-age story about an NBA longshot, complete with 2K's now-trademark annoying secondary characters, social interactions with pro players, and endorsement deals. But if you prefer the spirit of competition in the 5v5 Pro-Am or street games, you can skip the NBA life altogether. The new player progression system allows you to grind for attribute gains and skill badges no matter where you hoop, wisely freeing players to concentrate on the modes they like best.

Player progression benefits greatly from the new archetype system, which allows you to choose two primary attributes that define your playing style. This affords much more customization than last year's rigid system. More importantly, the subsequent leveling system returns, allowing users to upgrade the



skills they want; no more pouring VC into predetermined skill buckets like the past few 2K games. You still earn the bonus-oriented badges by performing specific feats on the court, but Visual Concepts finally acquiesced and allowed users to track their progression to unlocking these valuable traits. Better yet, you can specify which badge you want to improve during practice and focus on drills that best benefit that goal.

Unfortunately, developing a decent player still takes a considerable amount of time given your 60-overall starting rating. The progression feels natural during the NBA experience since you are an undrafted free agent, but given the amount of people who spend money for VC to upgrade their characters in online play, you are at a significant disadvantage in competitive situations for some time. This arbitrarily low rating also discourages experimentation in creating multiple characters. I would love to have a big man alternate to pair with my slashing wingman, but developing another low-rated player to respectability is too time consuming. I wish 2K had a respec system that allowed you to pour the attributes points you already purchased for one player class into another, unlocking overlapping badges you have already earned for your new character as well. This would go a long way to making the natural progression feel more valuable.

The MyCareer story doesn't deliver, but Visual Concepts integrated a narrative into the sim-focused MyGM mode for the first time ever. Dubbed "The Next Chapter," the story puts you into the penny loafers of a former NBA star who blew out his knee and subsequently transitioned into management. As the new general manager of a team of your choice, you face Machiavellian behind-the-scenes scenarios that test your loyalties and force you to protect your turf as the primary shot-caller when it comes to roster creation. The

story only lasts one season, and the crude cutscenes are tough to watch (not even politicians wave their hands that much during conversation), but I found the rollercoaster ride a compelling addition that puts you into the kind of sports drama you only hear about in rumor mills or on *30 for 30* episodes.

The rest of MyGM/MyLeague is still the most compelling franchise mode in sports, but it could use stronger team-building A.I. for the computer-controlled franchises. Imbalanced rosters, curious draft pick hoarding with no clear end game, and boneheaded A.I. trades were the order of the day for most of my seasons. The new CBA rules related to cap holds also appear to be broken at the moment, so I hope 2K addresses this in an upcoming patch.

Fans of collectible card modes have a lot of new elements to explore this year with MyTeam. The new coach proficiency system governs the type of players who best fit your scheme, which is another critical element to consider when building your fantasy lineup. The new Super Max challenge, which uses salary cap restrictions for roster creation, creates an interesting new playing field for those sick of going up against all-world lineups. My biggest MyTeam gripe pertains to the ridiculously short contracts; with only three- and four-game contracts available to me, I constantly felt the need to invest in contracts rather than spending money on attaining new players. Compared to Ultimate Team modes in EA Sports games, the balance feels off. The mode could also use more diversity in the types of packs available for purchase.

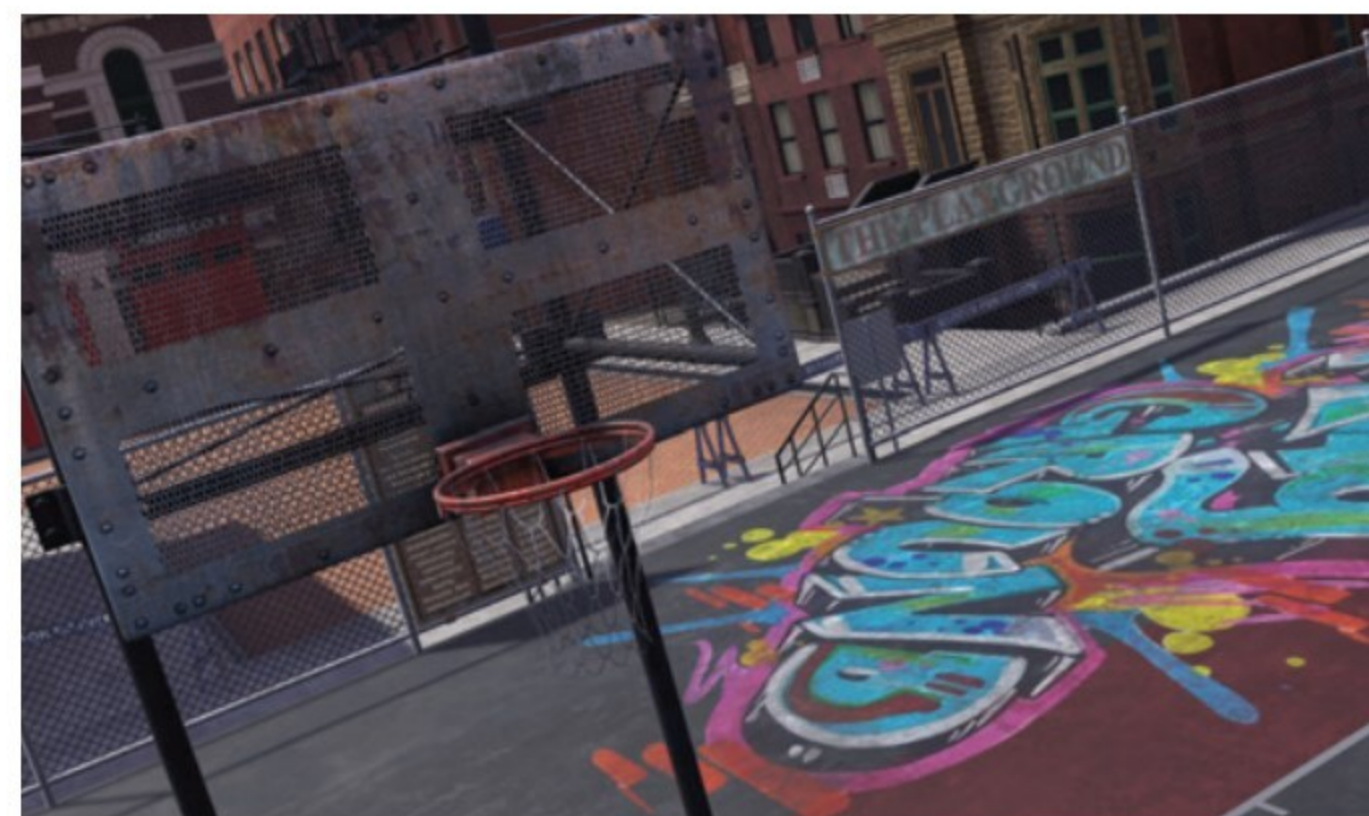
Sick of playing against super teams like the Golden State Warriors in online games? NBA 2K18 adds All-Time franchise teams to the mix, dramatically increasing the number of teams available for those who want to compete with the best rosters. Some legends like Moses Malone and Reggie Miller

are noticeably absent, but the teams are still a blast to play with.

Servers have never been 2K's strong suit, and stability problems once again try to box out NBA 2K18. Almost every Playground game I played was marred by lag, which compromises the fidelity of control the play demands. I heard bouncing basketballs in the streets and shots clanging off the hoops at the 2K Zone even though no one is visible, leading me to believe either the Neighborhood is haunted by the ghosts of hoopers past or the servers are awry. Other users have reported losing their MyPlayer characters and all the VC they purchased as well. I didn't experience server hiccups when playing Pro-Am, MyTeam, and Play Now games.

Not all the shots NBA 2K18 takes are swishes, but its shooting percentage is high enough to once again recommend you step on the hardcourt. The deep MyGM, MyCareer, and MyTeam modes offer hundreds of hours of compelling play, and the on-court action is once again stellar. Once the servers stabilize and Visual Concepts patches in some fixes, NBA 2K18 should once again be in pole position for sports game of the year. » **Matt Bertz**

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This review pertains to the PS4, Xbox One, and PC versions. The game is also available on Switch



NHL 18

Digging deep to earn its keep

8

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release September 15 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Refine the NHL experience with new dekes for high-end players and the return of the defensive skill stick

» Graphics

The game still lacks way too many player likenesses, which is always jarring when the broadcast zooms in on a player after whistles

» Sound

The new NHL Threes announcer challenges NBA Jam's Tim Kitzrow in all the right ways, and having more Ray Ferraro commentary during broadcasts is welcome

» Playability

The defensive skill stick makes positional defensive strategies more viable, and the new high-end dekes are well implemented. The major areas that still need refinement are puck pickups and player movement in small spaces

» Entertainment

Whether you want to play on the couch with buddies, grind for cards in Hockey Ultimate Team, compete online, or build a new dynasty in Franchise mode, NHL 18 mostly delivers

» Replay Value

High

Speed and skill are a given in the modern NHL, but those traits alone don't anoint Stanley Cup champions. Beating the best in the world takes more than tape-to-tape passes and wicked slappers. The little things like short shifts, always back checking, and never giving up on a free puck can make the difference when the skill gaps are marginal. EA Sports' NHL 18 may not have the cutting-edge features and talents of its FIFA and Madden brethren, but this year's edition starts doing a lot of the little things correctly, which results in a more competitive experience.

Competition intensifies on the ice thanks to the new bag of tricks developer EA Canada gives to attackers and defenders. On the rush, puck carries can unleash several new deke moves to gain separation and tickle the twine. Between-the-legs dekes, one-handed moves, and Datsyuk-esque puck flips are easy enough to learn but more difficult to pull off in fast-flying games. Defenders can neutralize these new threats thanks to the return of the defensive skill stick, which allows for better gap control and zone coverage to take away passing lanes. Offline players should appreciate the savvier A.I., which is much better at making smart breakout passes, using dekes to gain free ice, and staying in a proper position. Legacy problems like missed puck pick-ups and being unable to make micro movements in small spaces on defense still frustrate, but overall the gameplay feels strong.

At first glance, the headline Threes

mode introduced in NHL 18 looks like a casual arcade experience, but in practice EA wisely didn't handicap its controls. With a smaller sheet of ice, fast play, and money pucks that can turn the tide of matches, users can show off all their sickest moves and brutal checks in these fast and furious 3v3 competitions. EA's smart implementation of various ways to play with friends (any combination of offline couch play and online team-ups works) makes this a great destination mode for party pick-up games. Just don't expect much from the more fleshed-out Circuit experience. This grind against CHL, AHL, and NHL teams starts you with a roster of 60-rated players, and rather than reward you with fun-to-play NHL stars and legends at the peak of their powers, it instead doles out lesser-versions of modern players to pad out the journey. This robbed the Circuit of any fun for me, so I recommend sticking to the more entertaining exhibition match-ups.

For years EA has largely neglected easy improvements to make its franchise mode stronger, but NHL 18 shows that the developers were indeed listening. Fan requests like mid-season contract extensions, better draft classes, and stretching player ratings to create a bigger skill gap between stars and fourth liners make this a vastly improved mode. Realizing a pending free agent had no interest in re-signing with my club before the trade deadline gave me the opportunity to get something of value in return

instead of letting him walk for nothing. Draft class variety more realistically mimicked the modern NHL; I even saw one class with six NHL-ready players who could jump right into the pros. Player progressions can stagnate or surge based on their circumstances, which makes free agency more interesting. More than once I was able to find a stalled prospect for cheap who eventually realized his full potential with my squad. All of these small but important changes reinvigorate the mode much more than the headline inclusion of expansion drafts.

I'm glad EA chose to include expansion teams (both the incoming Las Vegas Golden Knights and a 32nd team of your creation), but the implementation leaves much to be desired. Including mechanics that allow you to squeeze out extra assets from teams for not picking particular players like Vegas GM George McPhee would have been nice, and picking as the 32nd team from Vegas' leftovers doesn't hold many exciting options. I wish they followed the lead of NBA 2K and allowed you to introduce the 32nd expansion team in a season down the line instead.

Speaking of lines, Hockey Ultimate Team offers new ways to improve yours via the introduction of solo challenges. The handful of options in HUT may not have the diversity or depth of the options on display in FIFA and Madden, but I'm nonetheless glad to have another way to gain coins.

EASHL, Be A Pro, and Draft Champions modes all return mostly unchanged for better or worse. Even with the reintroduction of being able to make trade requests, the Be A Pro mode in particular feels outdated given the story-focused experiences in other sports titles. While EASHL introduces 3v3 options for those who can't field a full lineup and want to avoid having A.I. on the ice, I still feel the mode would benefit greatly from a player progression system that served the needs of competitive balance while letting users customize skills in a meaningful way.

NHL 18 may not win every scrum in the corner or go top shelf with every shot it takes, but it still shows enough grit and hustle to earn your respect. The new offensive and defensive tools are welcome additions on the ice, and the entertaining Threes mode could become a party staple for hockey fans.

» Matt Bertz



NBA Live 18

Showing signs of a turnaround

Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** September 15 **Rating** E10+

No manual exists for the art of rebuilding a franchise. Some teams, like the Boston Celtics, turn around their fortunes in a matter of years. Others, like the Minnesota Timberwolves, bumble for more than a decade before hitting pay dirt with blue chip prospects. The NBA Live series has more in common with the Wolves than the Celtics. Over the last seven years it's suffered multiple cancellations and switched developers in hopes of regaining its footing. But after taking two years to hone its fundamentals and build a new RPG-driven game mode called The One, NBA Live 18 shows signs of a turnaround.

Think of The One as Live's version of NBA 2K's MyCareer – the career mode serves as a hub for a story-driven NBA experience known as The League, a single-player streetball mode called Pro-Am Tour, 5v5 online games, and daily online cooperative events that give you the chance to acquire rare cosmetics for your player. No matter which mode you play, all your actions earn experience that can be allocated to the primary and secondary skills of your choosing. The flexibility of this upgrade system allows users to create the kinds of hoopers they want. Leveling is also markedly faster than rival NBA 2K18. You start in the 70s and can ramp up to a respectable rating quickly.

The League and Street experiences push a light narrative forward via text conversations with friends, reporters, agents, coaches, and the like. The tale of your player's rise to stardom

gives the mode some flavor but isn't a big draw; EA uses this mechanism mostly as a way to create new performance goals that reward you with hype or currency.

Players can spend currency on reward crates that increase in diversity as your hype builds in the league and on the streets. Each crate has some mixture of apparel, shoes, accessories, or tattoos that you earn randomly. You can see the items in each crate before buying, but getting the item you want is a crapshoot. You can't simply buy the pair of shoes or tattoo you want until you rank way up, and then you pay a premium for the available items. I'd prefer to see the crate system abolished in favor of a straightforward store that lets you buy what you want when you want.

On the court, NBA Live 18's gameplay gives you all the tools you need to break ankles with sick dribbling moves. The right analog stick dribbling system is simple to use and effective; even though one of my character builds was a point scorer who specialized in three-pointers and passing, I easily broke down defenders and slashed to the hoop. If anything, the one-on-one game is too easy against the A.I. On defense, staying with a slasher is much easier thanks to a directional indicator underneath your player that tips you to which direction you should move to shut down drives to the lane.

The one-on-one experience gives NBA Live 18 a great gameplay foundation to build from, and playing off the ball is strengthened with on-floor

tutorials that show you where to move when another player has the ball. However, the game still needs work in other areas. NBA Live 18 has problems with passing in close proximity; many of these simple dishes end up as turnovers. A.I. offenses don't always move through the stars; I frequently saw offensive engines like Kemba Walker and Kawhi Leonard end games with minimal shot attempts. Games that go down to the wire aren't as dramatic as they should be thanks to clueless situational awareness from the A.I. When a team is down by one with 19 seconds left, they don't jack up a three-pointer four seconds into a shot clock.

Outside of The One, NBA Live 18 doesn't give hoop heads a lot to be excited about. The franchise mode smartly borrows the RPG-leveling concept from Madden, but several infrastructure problems like simming games by the week, no prospect scouting, and no draft day trade options keep this mode from being a serious destination for sim heads. I love that EA included WNBA teams, but with no mode support beyond exhibition games, it doesn't give fans a lot to do with the teams. EA also included a barebones version of Ultimate Team.

NBA Live 18 still doesn't match or best NBA 2K18 across the board, but this year does show progress. The stable online matches, interesting career mode concept, and adequate if arcadey gameplay all point to a more promising future for EA's most struggling sports franchise. » **Matt Bertz**

7

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**

After a two-year hiatus, return to the court with improved gameplay and a promising new career mode

» **Graphics**

Players look much better than past Live games, but the models still don't match NBA 2K18 in terms of realism

» **Sound**

The commentary team is more reactive than in years past, but repetition still sets in early

» **Playability**

The one-on-one game is simple to execute on both ends of the floor

» **Entertainment**

Still lacks the depth of its rival, but The One mode gives Live a destination mode worth building upon

» **Replay Value**

Moderate





Knack II

Growing into something substantial

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Sony Interactive Entertainment Developer SIE Japan Studio Release September 5 Rating E10+

PS4

» Concept

A sequel that finds success through variety and rapid changes in the gameplay script

» Graphics

Knack is still a strange-looking character to behold, but the chaos he can unleash is impressively captured in explosions of polygons

» Sound

I love how the orchestrated score changes tone to capture the scale of Knack and the flow of the narrative

» Playability

Knack's ability to change height is tapped frequently for combat and traversal needs, making for more interesting challenges – all of which are made better through co-op

» Entertainment

Still the same Knack gameplay at its core, but now with greatly needed variety

» Replay Value

Moderate

Console launches have a long and frustrating history of mediocre games. Knack is the prime example of a launch title that gave gamers a brief taste of what the PlayStation 4 could do before the adventure settled into a mundane rhythm of repetition. The showering of polygons ended up being the highlight in an adventure that rarely tapped into the potential of a size-changing hero. The idea was interesting enough to lure people in, but the execution didn't quite hit the mark.

Enter Knack II. Iteration can go a long way in making a formula work, and that is crystal clear in this sequel, which clings to the core tenets of the inaugural release, yet finds ways to keep them exciting, fresh, and varied from start to finish. The changing scale of the character also grows in meaningful ways to deliver the sense of being incredibly powerful at 30 feet in height, and resourceful at just two.

Knack II clobbers the combat repetition that plagued the debut, and never falls into a rut. Instead, the action bounces from one challenge to the next. A typical level could begin with an average-sized Knack brawling against a handful of trolls, move on to tiny Knack using stealth to infiltrate a base, shift to a harrowing platforming sequence, and conclude with giant Knack laying waste to tanks and giants. Each level has a nice blend of action, along with well-placed secrets that require a keen eye to detect. I was impressed just how

quickly it would move on from one challenge to the next.

Combat is the most enhanced element, sewing in a variety of moves and powers that are fluid and fun to use. The feeling of being a force of pure destruction amplifies as Knack learns new abilities. These powers can also be upgraded by investing points in a skill tree that ups his speed, power and more. By the end of the game, even a smaller version of Knack can topple giants using a flurry of punches, round-house kicks, and aerial slams. He can even grab enemies and pull them in for a pummeling using an extendable arm, much like Mr. Fantastic. The enemy A.I. is quite resourceful, knowing when to rush if your health is low, and when to keep guard.

The first game pushed players to use the same attacks (sometimes modified by elements) against the same foes. As monotonous as it was, the combat was still surprisingly challenging. Knack II retains that difficulty, but it's made less annoying thanks to better checkpoints and less frustrating enemy designs. It also helps that, much like the first game, you can play this entire campaign with a friend via couch co-op. This is the optimal way to play, as new moves are unlocked when the two Knacks interact with one other. For instance, unleashing that flurry of punches into the back of your friend's Knack will hurl relic pieces at your foe.

The platforming sequences also

require skill, but are rendered somewhat challenge-free given the lenient checkpoint system. Regardless of the challenge, the act of jumping feels great and is backed by harrowing designs filled with spinning gears, sliding platforms, and sections that require the player to switch between tall and tiny Knack in a flash. Again, variety is key to keeping the player off kilter. The puzzles littered between combat and platforming are perplexing, and do a great job changing up the flow of action.

SIE Japan Studio has created a game that I didn't want to put down and enjoyed playing from start to finish, yet I never once felt a strong tie to the world or Knack as a protagonist. He's as unlikable a character as I've seen in a game. He's fun to control, and is somewhat cute in his tiniest form, but has the appeal of a heap of building blocks and a personality to match.

Given how uninteresting Knack and his companions are, the villains end up stealing the spotlight in this lengthy (and beautifully animated) story. The narrative's introductory chapters are as predictable as can be, but things begin to unravel in interesting ways roughly halfway through the campaign. I like where the story goes, and it gets surprisingly dark in the final moments.

Knack II is the sequel no one expected to see, yet everyone should consider playing, especially if they are fond of Ratchet & Clank, Jak and Daxter, and Crash Bandicoot. » **Andrew Reiner**

Everybody's Golf

Charm only gets you so far

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (20-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Clap Hanz **Release** August 29 **Rating** E

7

PS4

» Concept

Bring the franchise into a quasi-open world with disjointed results. The gameplay, however, remains the same

» Graphics

The environments are beautiful, with articulated landscapes and nice colors

» Sound

A slight ping sound alerts you when you're near special items and coins in the online world

» Playability

The three-click swing is classic for a reason, but the game also includes a simplified two-click swing. It's simpler, but it also produces random results

» Entertainment

The game makes you replay a paltry number of out-of-the-box courses and its modes lack features, resulting in a sidestep for the series

» Replay Value

Moderate



Having the Hot Shots Golf series (as it used to be known in North America) on PS4 is undeniably great. I was hoping that since the game isn't tied to a platform launch like it normally is, developer Clap Hanz would be able to stretch out and offer more than the normal collection of courses and unlockable opponents. That's the intent of Everybody's Golf, with its online courses and hub world you can wander around. However, the disjointed implementation of those plans is where the game trips up.

Despite having various modes available as separate destinations from the hub world (including career, online play, and Open Courses), no one mode satisfies. Career mode is the usual gauntlet of beating characters in order, but the path is marred by the slim offering of only five courses out of the box. You are left with too much grinding on the same courses and holes, even with different parameters added like small/large holes and penalties for going into the rough.

These same courses are available in the online Open Courses sections. Here everyone runs around in the environment and posts scores on leaderboards, but they aren't directly playing each other (for that, you have to go to a specific competitive online section), although you can see players and communicate with them. You can fish, swim, and find special items and

currency in the Open Courses. However, these activities are not that interesting, largely because you've been on these courses a ton already.

To play directly against other players online (standard local multiplayer is also an option) at launch, you only have two options: creating/finding a stroke play lobby or heading to the Turf War mode. Turf War is fun; your team has a limited amount of time to score better on select holes than the other team to claim the hole. The problem is the matchmaking can be uneven, since a team with more players has an advantage. Even worse, you get no reward for winning – another weird dead end.

It would be nice if what you did in the online portions of the game helped unlock the career mode courses faster, like how many other titles preserve your progress across modes, but that's not the case. The career mode and hub world feel further isolated because both act like tutorials in that part of their function is to explain core concepts. But what are they an intro to if the online portion they ostensibly open into is underdeveloped itself?

At least the three-click gameplay is reliable, and in one of the game's few positive steps forward, it uses clubs that get better the more you perform with them. With different sets to try out, I like taking a chance with ones that might be harder to golf with for the payoff of potentially better shots and the fact that

I'm improving them with every outing.

This franchise's attempt to step out from its own shadow is only half successful, and not because it dared to do so in the first place, but because it didn't dare enough. It also lacks a singular vision, and instead feels like a collection of parts pieced together. Sony has promised online tournaments and other additions post-launch (two DLC courses are already grayed out in the course selection screens), and an inaccessible online gate is present, but that's meaningless at this point in the game's life. Everybody's Golf is fun to play – as it always has been – but that's not enough to fulfill its own ambitions or mine. » **Matthew Kato**



Path Of Exile: Fall Of Oriath

The reigning lord of distraction

9.5



Style 1-Player Action (6-Player Online) Publisher Grinding Gear Games
Developer Grinding Gear Games Release August 24 Rating M

Xbox One

» Concept

Bring the popular free-to-play action/RPG from PC to Xbox One – with controller support and all of the game's impressive depth

» Graphics

It's hard to call a game that includes blood-filled aqueducts "beautiful," but Path of Exile is richly detailed and interesting to look at. You may need to scooch closer for some UI elements, though

» Sound

Weapons and spells connect with satisfying audio impact. The dialogue can be corny, but everyone seems to be having a good time

» Playability

Controller support is generally solid, though it can be clunky for skills that require precise targeting. Inventory management is also a chore

» Entertainment

Players who invest the time to negotiate Path of Exile's steep learning curve are in for an incredibly satisfying and rewarding action/RPG

» Replay Value

High

Path of Exile was already a sprawling adventure, but the action/RPG grew even bigger in August. The Fall of Oriath expansion added six acts to the game's campaign (for a total of 10, not including the end-game epilogue), stuffed monster pockets with new items and loot, and fundamentally tweaked the game's difficulty and progression path. And, nearly four years after the base game officially debuted on PC, it's finally available on Xbox One. Grinding Gear Games has methodically finessed PoE since it was officially released nearly four years ago, and players who drop into this dark fantasy world for the first time will reap the benefits.

If you're new to the game, getting settled can take a little while. On its surface, it's a straight-up Diablo clone, with the same presentation, environments, and overall flow that creates an immediate sense of familiarity. While it certainly shares foundational elements from Blizzard's series, Grinding Gear Games veered into a different direction. Or, more accurately, a whole lot of different directions.

One of the things I like most about PoE is the sheer number of gameplay systems and microloops that are available at any given time. The most notable (and perhaps notorious) of them is the game's massive skill tree. It's an intricate web that all character classes share, giving you the ability to slowly devote points into becoming a powerful archetypal hero or dabbling around to develop a hybrid that fits your

own personal playstyle. Unlike a game like Diablo III, where you can mix and match abilities to create new character builds whenever you feel like it, PoE is more deliberate.

My first build was a zookeeper-style witch, which is a style of play that I usually enjoy. I squeaked through the campaign thanks, in large part, to her skeleton army. The Xbox One's controller generally works well, and I was able to hang back and accurately fire off potshots while enemies were distracted by my minions. Casting spells that require precise placement was a bit trickier. Using an on-screen cursor to drop them into place is a clunky process that requires holding down a trigger and then the corresponding skill button. Life comes at you fast in PoE, especially when you're a glass cannon, and an analog stick is no match for a mouse in some circumstances.

Since characters share the same skill tree and have access to the same large pool of weapons, skills, and other items, I was concerned my next character would feel too similar. Thankfully, that wasn't the case. My marauder is a melee maniac who sprints into enemy clusters and swings his axes until there's nothing left to swing at. He feels completely different from my witch, which was exactly what I was hoping for.

PoE has a lot of content to wade through in the lengthy campaign, which has more than doubled with the new expansion. While you keep a shared inventory stash between

characters, your new heroes will have to play through the campaign again. The Fall of Oriath expansion removed the game's previous loop of playing through the campaign multiple times at increasing difficulty levels, which is an improvement. The overall story is fine, but considering how much variety the game's randomly generated maps offer, I would have loved for my second character to have access to something similar to Diablo III's adventure mode. There is a loose analog in PoE's end-game atlas content, but that's reserved for high-level characters.

PoE is a free-to-play game, which means that there are microtransactions. Fortunately, they're handled well. Aside from the ability to buy new character slots and add inventory space (which is, by default, generous), everything else is cosmetic. You can pay for spell effects, so that you hurl flaming skulls instead of fireballs, as well as a vast array of costume elements, pets, and weapon skins. Most importantly, the game's economy – a huge part of the experience – is completely divorced from any for-pay elements. Instead, players buy and sell items using crafting items and other rare drops.

I've been having a great time with PoE, and it's fast become my go-to when I need to get in a rewarding grind. The Xbox One version may be a little late to the party, but it was absolutely worth the wait. This fantastic game takes the best of the genre and propels them to impressive new heights.

» Jeff Cork

The Fall of Oriath expansion adds six new acts to the game





Metroid: Samus Returns

A charge blast from the past

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

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PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer MercurySteam, Nintendo EPD **Release** September 15 **Rating** E10+

9.75

The original Metroid pioneered a new breed of exploration-based gaming. It was a nonlinear experience that allowed players to traverse eerie alien landscapes, slowly amassing an ordnance of new weapons and tools that would help them overcome both environmental obstacles and combat challenges. Metroid's formula was so strong that – even 30 years later – its influence on the industry is still felt. Games like Axiom Verge, Ori and the Blind Forest, and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night can all trace their heritage back to Samus' first steps on the planet Zebes. However, despite the many challengers to Metroid's throne, Samus Returns proves that Nintendo still understands the formula best.

The game picks up right after the events of the first Metroid. Intergalactic bounty hunter Samus Aran must travel to the Metroid home-world of SR388 and eradicate the alien species before they can be turned into biological weapons. This 3DS title is technically a remake of the Game Boy title Metroid II: Return of Samus, and fans of the original will recognize certain enemies and environments, but Samus Returns features so many fresh ideas that it feels like a completely new adventure.

One of the big new additions to the franchise is a melee counter system that allows Samus to stun enemies with well-timed button counters that expose their weak spots and leave

them vulnerable to a quick finish. This counter makes the moment-to-moment action more engaging than past 2D Metroids, and it keeps you on your toes because you never know when some creature is going leap from the shadows. Whenever I missed a counter, I knew it was my fault, but I loved finding the perfect flow in combat and hitting two or three counters back-to-back then wiping out a screen's worth of enemies in seconds.

Like previous entries, Samus Returns features alien environments that do an incredible job pulling players deeper into cavernous landscapes with the promise of powerful upgrades. Many enhancements are familiar favorites, like the ice beam and spider ball, but MercurySteam also delivers a few new gadgets that offer fun twists to both exploration and combat. For example, Samus can use a new alien energy called aeon to overpower her suit for a short time, granting her defensive and offensive boosts. I got a real thrill out of using a new machine-gun aeon attack to burn through enemies who had previously seemed invincible. Likewise, Samus' aeon shield was invaluable during boss fights and while passing through volatile habitats.

Thanks to a massive list of collectibles, your next reward is always just around the corner. Every area is littered with tiny power-ups like extra missiles and energy tanks, so you constantly feel rewarded for exploring every nook and cranny. Of course,

many of these toys remain tantalizingly out of reach and beg you to come back after you've acquired the right tools to extract them from their environmental cages. The big and small rewards are so evenly spaced out that Samus Returns' pacing remains superb, and I had trouble putting the game down for any length of time.

Collecting all of Samus' upgrades is even more rewarding thanks to SR388's richly detailed locations. These subterranean labyrinths wind through lava-filled caverns and ancient alien ruins. Mapping out the entire subsystem requires clever use of your entire toolkit, and subtle background touches like glowing eyes and crumbling debris help sell the feeling of foreboding isolation.

Samus' last 2D adventure was in 2004 with the GBA release Metroid: Zero Mission, which was a remake of the original Metroid. Despite the lengthy hiatus between 2D entries, I was initially disappointed to hear that MercurySteam's Metroid project was another remake. However, Samus Returns has enough unique content that it feels like a worthy sequel. MercurySteam's first outing with the franchise is also different enough from the recent fan remake AM2R, so fans shouldn't hesitate to pick up this rare gem. This might be Samus' first 2D adventure in more than a dozen years, but it's a great reminder of why we fell in love with the franchise in the first place. » **Ben Reeves**

3DS

» Concept

Samus journeys to planet SR388 to explore its puzzle-laden caverns and eradicate the Metroids once and for all in a remake that feels remarkably new

» Graphics

MercurySteam was clearly inspired by the sharp designs of the Metroid Prime series, and these environments remain rich with detail

» Sound

Metroid's synth-like soundtrack is so haunting that I recommend isolating yourself with a pair of headphones for the full experience

» Playability

Samus has a greater aiming range than ever, and the action remains engaging thanks to her new melee counter

» Entertainment

A steady drip of upgrades and collectibles ensures that exploring SR388 won't grow tiring anytime soon

» Replay Value

Moderately high



6.75 Absolver

Platform PS4, PC **Release** August 29 **Rating** T

Slocap's first foray shows glimmers of brilliance in the combat and the somewhat intriguing aesthetic of masked martial artists going at it in strange lands. Even so, Absolver feels like a collection of little pieces from something larger that just never happens. — Daniel Tack



8 Monster Hunter Stories

Platform 3DS **Release** September 8
Rating E10+

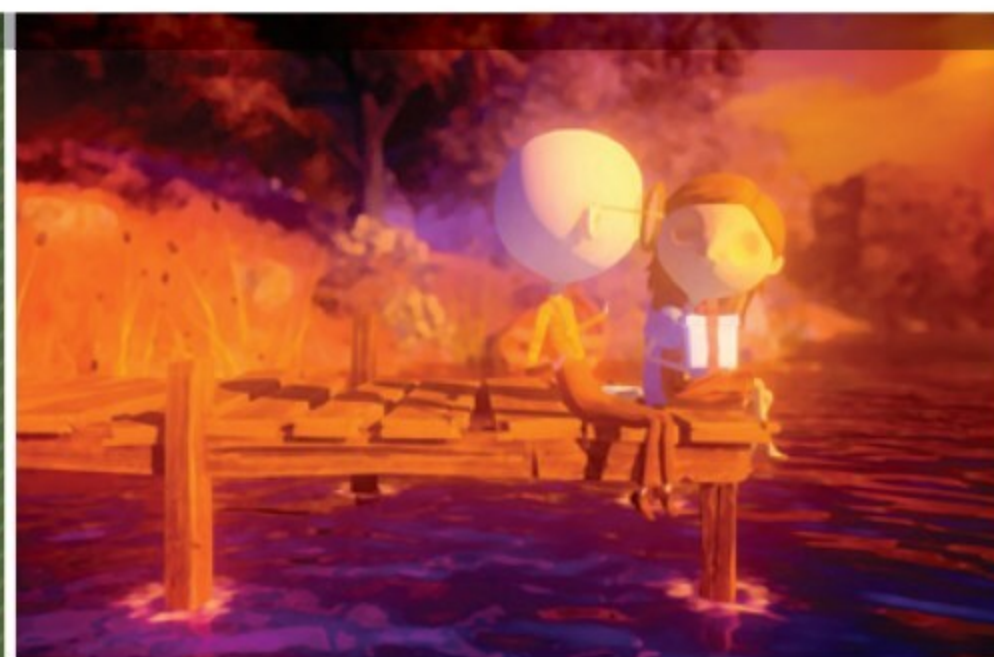
Fans of turn-based JRPG fare, newcomers to the franchise, and younger gamers have more to enjoy here – to explore and engage with the Monster Hunter universe without having to enter through a less accessible door.

— Daniel Tack

7 Last Day Of June

Platform PS4, PC **Release** August 31 **Rating** E

Last Day of June paints a world that is visually beautiful on the surface and darker at its core, but its emotional story loses luster quickly. While some narrative twists drew me in nearing its conclusion, I never connected enough with the story and felt distracted by its repetitive nature. — Elise Favis



7.75 Guardians Of The Galaxy: Episode 3 – More Than A Feeling

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android **Release** June 6 **Rating** T

If this installment fails to dramatically up the tension, at least it maintains a solid storytelling pace, and fans of the galaxy's most loveable space misfits should continue to find moments of fun.

— Matt Miller



7 Sparc

Platform PSVR **Release** August 29 **Rating** E

The act of bouncing a ball back and forth against an opponent in a virtual space, the main hook of Sparc, is fun and works well. After overcoming my initial shortcomings of being able to accurately throw a digital ball, I quickly began to enjoy Sparc and even worked up a small sweat. Beyond the basic fun of the main game, however, there isn't much here. — Kyle Hilliard

7 NASCAR Heat 2

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** September 12 **Rating** E

NASCAR Heat 2 adds racing series, rivalries, and other features, but misses an opportunity to make them meaningful and expand the actual scope and excitement of the game. — Matthew Kato

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SUPER *POWERED*

The lasting legacy of the Super NES

by Ben Reeves

In the '80s, Nintendo saved the video game industry with the release of the NES. That console ushered in a renewed enthusiasm for interactive entertainment and established a series of brands, such as Mario, Zelda, and Metroid, which remain relevant today. Over the course of only a few years, Nintendo's name became virtually synonymous with video games, and its characters grew so popular that they worked their way into breakfast cereals, lunch boxes, and Saturday morning cartoons.

However, by the early '90s, Nintendo's chokehold on the industry had started to slip. More powerful 16-bit consoles like the Sega Genesis and the TurboGrafx-16 had begun to challenge Nintendo's dominance. To stay relevant, Nintendo needed to update its hardware.

A skunkworks team inside Nintendo's research and development department began crafting a successor to the NES. The system would be surprisingly underpowered, but it would contain several modern gaming concepts and ultimately help cement Nintendo's place in the industry. That console was the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, and many consider it to be one of Nintendo's crowning achievements.

Suping Up The NES

Masayuki Uemura was an engineer working for the Sharp Corporation when Nintendo approached him about making video game consoles. At Sharp, Uemura had built photo-sensitive cell technology, and Nintendo wanted to use this technology to build a light gun that could interact with televisions. Not only did Uemura help build Nintendo's light gun, but he went on to design the original NES console that it was bundled with. Over the years, Uemura produced games like Donkey Kong, Mario Bros., and Ice Climber before finally moving on to work on Nintendo's next big console. However, designing the SNES would prove to be more complicated than Nintendo's original console.

Uemura centered the SNES architecture on a custom-built 3.58-MHz CPU. Even for the day, this wasn't incredibly impressive. Sega's Genesis console, which released more than two years prior to the SNES, housed a faster processor. However, Uemura designed the SNES's chipset for maximum visual and audio performance, which helped disguise its lack of horsepower. For example, while the Sega Genesis could only display 512 different colors on a television screen, the SNES had a color palette of over 32,000 colors and could display more than 128 sprites simultaneously.

The Super Nintendo's lack of power likely came from Nintendo's original desire to allow the SNES to be backward compatible with NES cartridges. The NES was the most popular video game console on the market, and it had amassed an impressive library of titles, so allowing the SNES to run all of the NES's software would have given Nintendo's new console an impressive head start. Unfortunately,

this feature was axed as the system progressed toward launch.

Fortunately, the SNES had a few unique graphical effects up its sleeve, which made it worth the upgrade. Nintendo designed the SNES to allow for seven different graphical display modes, but only one of these modes reach widespread acclaim. Before the system's release, Nintendo's marketing department began trumpeting the graphical feats of Mode 7, a display setting that allowed developers to rotate and scale background layers in their games. This faux 3D effect – seen in games like Super Mario Kart, Pilotwings, and Super Castlevania – became one of the SNES' distinguishing features and helped set the console apart from its competitors.

After establishing the SNES's internal guts, Nintendo began to think about how its new system should look and feel. Early in the concept phase, Uemura thought that the SNES might function a bit more like a personal computer. In Japan, the NES was called the Famicom, a portmanteau of family and computer. Uemura felt that he might expand on this family

computer concept by giving the system a keyboard and card reader, but these input devices eventually fell away in favor of a more traditional video game controller. However, Nintendo's new controller received a drastic remodel, and the studio design a more ergonomic controller that players could hold comfortably for hours.

Further inspiration for the SNES controller came from an unlikely source. Fighting games were incredibly popular in arcades at the time, and Nintendo felt that it needed six button inputs on its controller to accommodate console ports for games like Street Fighter II. During focus testing, however, Nintendo discovered that players were easily confused by six face buttons. Four face buttons, tilted into a diamond shape, were much easier for thumbs to navigate, so Nintendo shifted two of its face buttons to the controller's shoulders. The SNES featured several major innovations, but this controller design, which has been the basis for nearly every controller since, may have been the SNES' biggest contribution to the industry.



The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past



Super Mario World was one of the first games released for the SNES, but it is still heralded as one of the best. Speed runners have been able to finish the game in less than ten minutes



Top 10 SNES Games

1. Final Fantasy III (pictured)

Known as Final Fantasy VI in Japan, Final Fantasy III perfected the 2D role-playing game. An amazing cast of characters with unique abilities gave random battles unprecedented depth, the plot was filled with incredible twists, and the soundtrack set a new standard in video game music. Packed with legendary moments like the opera-house sequence, Final Fantasy III was the best role-playing game of its day and it remains one of the best almost 30 years later.

2. The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

The original Zelda had a tremendous impact on gaming, but the franchise's SNES debut polished and improved upon its core elements to a degree few could have expected. Link still scoured dungeons for keys, bested giant bosses, and saved the girl, but it was done on a much larger scale. Thankfully, gamers had access to an arsenal of fun weapons and gadgets to help them on their quest to defeat Ganon.

3. Chrono Trigger

This ground-breaking JRPG eschews many of the elements that drive people away from the genre. Between the lack of random battles and the surprisingly well-written time-travel story, there's plenty here for even those who typically dislike JRPGs. If the great plot and fast-paced fights aren't enough, Square also used Chrono Trigger to introduce the idea of a "new game plus," opening the game up to multiple replays with a dozen possible endings.

4. Super Metroid

Samus Aran's first adventure broke barriers, but her outing on the Super Nintendo established a framework that would inspire franchises from Castlevania to Batman: Arkham Knight. Super Metroid delivered a perfect storm of upgrades and secrets, and provided players with an unparalleled freedom to explore an entire world of unearthly curiosities.

5. Street Fighter II

People crowded into arcades to watch frenzied bouts between Street Fighter II's world warriors, waiting for a turn to demonstrate their skills and put their quarters on the line. All eight fighters had a diverse arsenal of special moves that could be executed in a flash with specific joystick motions and button presses. It may not sound revolutionary now, but that's because every fighting game since owes its existence to Street Fighter II.

6. Super Mario Kart

Combining wacky combat racing with adorable characters and inventive tracks was so successful that Super Mario Kart created a genre that remains a gaming stalwart to this day. The design skillfully walks the tightrope between "fun for all ages" and "victory is determined by a die roll" that makes it endlessly playable. Super Mario Kart remains one of the all-time greats at entrancing a group of friends on a couch.

7. Super Mario World

Since players could finally save their progress, Nintendo crammed Super Mario World with loads of content and pitch-perfect controls. Stages had multiple exits that unlocked secret paths – most notably the unusual and challenging Star Road. And don't forget the first appearance of Mario's dino pal, Yoshi.

8. Super Bomberman

Before it became a genre, "party game" was synonymous with Super Bomberman. In fact, Super Bomberman often created the party in the first place. If you bought a multitap, it was probably for Super Bomberman. The game has reappeared on countless platforms thanks to the endless gratification that comes from trapping friends in the middle of a string of bombs, and laughing maniacally as they explode.

9. Final Fantasy II

None of the early console RPGs captured gamers' imaginations like the adventures of Cecil and his band of heroic friends. A huge cast of characters kept this story of redemption and love compelling for hour upon hour of monster-slaying goodness. The expansive game world included everything from an underground landscape of stone and lava to a thrilling conclusion on the moon.

10. Tetris Attack

While the name may be misleading since it barely resembles the classic puzzle title it's named after, Tetris Attack could make even the most quiet and reserved friends turn into smack-talking competitive freaks as they swapped colored gems and created cascades of exploding blocks. Tetris Attack's core concept was so brilliant that it's inspired a million phone games, but we'll take the original any day of the week.

Coming To America

In Japan, the SNES (called the Super Famicom) had a plain, square design and rounded edges. However, before shipping the console overseas, Nintendo of America believed it need to redesign the case for the western market. Nintendo of American passed the project to an in-house designer named Lance Barr, who felt that the Japanese design was too toy-like.

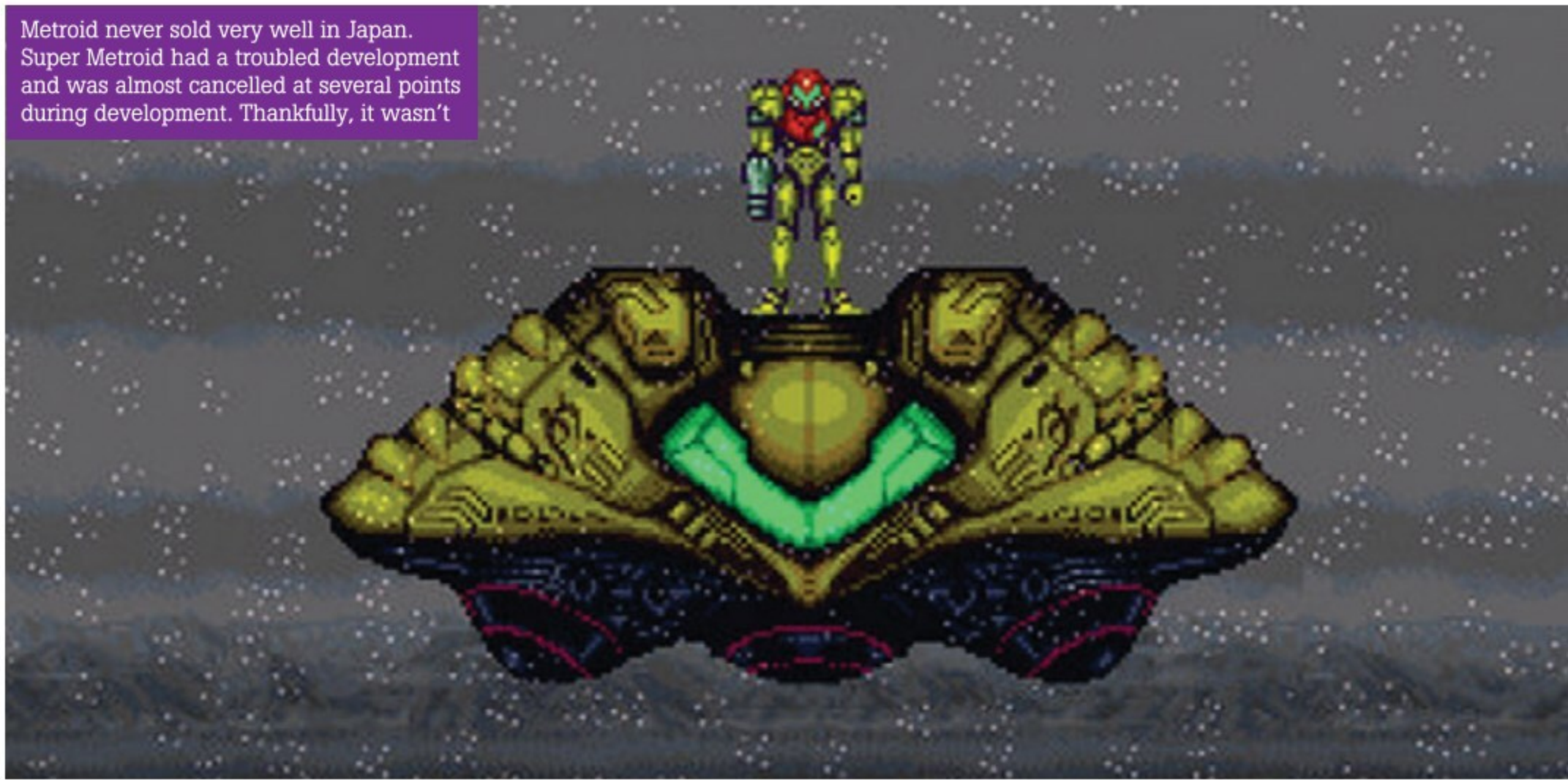
“The Super Famicom was maybe okay for the market in Japan,” Barr told Nintendojo back in 2007. “For the U.S., I felt that it was too soft and had no edge. We were always looking at future modular components (even the NES had a connector on the bottom), so you had to design with the idea of stacking on top of other components. I thought the Super Famicom didn't look good when stacked and even by itself, had a kind of ‘bag of bread’ look.”

The American redesign was also a reaction to feedback on Nintendo’s previous console. The original NES was a relatively simple gray box, and Nintendo of America had received several complaints from NES owner who had placed drinks or bowls of cereal on top of their consoles only to spill liquid into the vent at the top of the unit. To prevent SNES owners from the same fate, Barr made sure that the U.S. version of the SNES had an uneven surface. Barr also gave the console a more muted color scheme, and changed the controller’s X and Y buttons so they had a concave curvature, which offered a better haptic distinction between all four face buttons.

Now You’re Playing With Super Power

When Nintendo released its original NES, the video game market was in the middle of a large-scale recession, and Nintendo had to trick retailers into putting its new console on their shelves by marketing it as a toy. Five years later, those roles had reversed,

Metroid never sold very well in Japan. Super Metroid had a troubled development and was almost cancelled at several points during development. Thankfully, it wasn’t



and retailers were begging Nintendo for larger shipments of the Super NES.

More than 1.5 million fans rushed out to pre-order the system before it launched, and Nintendo’s initial shipments sold out in about two hours. In Japan, the Super Nintendo was such a hot commodity that the consoles were reportedly shipped to stores secretly and under the cover of night, for fear that the Yakuza might rob retailers. The SNES’s launch day became an international media circus as thousands of people lined up in front of electronics stores hoping to get their hands on a console.

“Many parents called in sick to work so that they could join the lines of waiting shoppers,” wrote Steven L. Kent in his book *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. “All of Tokyo was slowed down by the crowds, and a frenzy began when news spread that Nintendo had shipped only 300,000 consoles. The pushing and shoving were so chaotic that the Japanese government later asked Nintendo and other video game companies to restrict future hardware releases to weekends.”

The fervor over Nintendo’s new

console is even more surprising in light of the fact that the console only had two launch titles in Japan: F-Zero and Super Mario World. For the U.S. release, the following year, Nintendo added the amateur flight simulator Pilotwings to that lineup. Three games might seem paltry today, but Shigeru Miyamoto and his team of designers were only given 15 months to design and code the entire launch library from the time they saw the first machine designs.

Over the years the Super NES amassed a library far more impressive than any of the system’s technical specifications (see sidebar for our favorites). Nintendo continued to support its console with some of its most beloved products, such as The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, Super Metroid, and Super Mario Kart. Meanwhile the world’s most prolific development studios, such as Square, Capcom, and Konami, rushed to release their titles on Nintendo’s new hardware. Even near the end of its lifespan, the Super Nintendo was turning out graphical powerhouses like Donkey Kong Country, Star Fox, and Super Mario World 2: Yoshi’s Island, which seemed to push the limits of the hardware to new heights.

The Super Nintendo proved that Nintendo wasn’t a one-hit wonder, and it cemented the company’s place in the video game industry. Much of the nostalgia surrounding Nintendo’s brands was built up during the SNES’s lifespan as its meager launch lineup grew into a library containing some of the most beloved games of all time. The Super NES was never the most powerful system on the market, but Nintendo understood that developers didn’t need to possess the most powerful hardware to be a market leader. The Super Nintendo helped shaped the industry like few consoles have before or since, and it created a foundation for our modern gaming landscape.



The Japanese design for the SNES (called the Super Famicom) was much boxier. Nintendo of America felt it looked too much like a toy and redesigned the system for U.S. release



Miyamoto Quotables

It's easy to posit that Shigeru Miyamoto is the most important developer in the video game industry. He's the father of both Mario and Zelda and many other characters and games that have come to define the interactive entertainment medium. He's a genius, and like many of his ilk, a quirky one, leading to quotes that are simultaneously brilliant and strange. Here are just a few of our favorite things the famed developer has said over the years. *by Kyle Hilliard*

"A delayed game is eventually good; a bad game is bad forever."

"Video games are bad for you? That's what they said about rock n' roll."

"Players are artists who create their own reality within the game."

"I could make Halo. It's not that I couldn't design that game. It's just that I choose not to. The thing about my game design is that I never try to look for what people want and then try to design that game."

"I think that inside every adult is the heart of a child. We just gradually convince ourselves that we have to act more like adults."

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Issue 295 • November 2017

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